



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTC SENTINEL

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## About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

# Syria: A Wicked Problem for All

By Bryan Price



Syrian rebels stand guard as protesters wave Islamist flags during an anti-regime demonstration in Aleppo in March 2013. - AFP/Getty

ON AUGUST 26, 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry called the recent use of chemical weapons outside of Damascus “undeniable” and a “moral obscenity.”<sup>1</sup> This is the latest chapter in an already complex civil war in Syria, a crisis that Kerry’s predecessor called a “wicked problem” for the U.S. foreign policy establishment.<sup>2</sup> That term was introduced 40 years ago by two professors of urban planning who were trying to identify what differentiated hard but relatively ordinary problems

from those that were truly “wicked.”<sup>3</sup> In their interpretation, wicked problems feature innumerable causes, are tough to adequately describe, and by definition have no “right” answers. In fact, solutions to wicked problems are impossible to objectively evaluate; rather, it is better to evaluate solutions to these problems as being shades of good and bad.<sup>4</sup>

By anyone’s account, the Syrian civil war satisfies all of the criteria of a wicked problem. Like most crises, the issues surrounding the Syrian conflict are complex and interrelated, and there are multiple competing foreign policy

1 John Kerry, “Remarks on Syria,” U.S. Department of State, August 26, 2013; Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, “Syrian Rebels Accuse Government of Chemical Attack,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2013.

2 “The President and the Secretary of State,” *60 Minutes*, January 27, 2013.

3 Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973).

4 John C. Camillus, “Strategy as a Wicked Problem,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2008.

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interests at stake for the United States. As a result, there is no shortage of disagreement about the way forward for the United States in responding to the conflict.

The discourse on U.S. policy options for Syria features two contradictory approaches. One camp argues that an effective solution requires direct American involvement, including military intervention, and the removal of President Bashar al-Assad from power. While the United States called for al-Assad to step down as early as August 2011,<sup>5</sup> supporters of this approach complain that U.S. actions to end the violence and remove al-Assad have not matched its rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> Even this summer's decision to send limited arms in support of the rebel cause is, in their view, a case of too little, too late.<sup>7</sup> Those wanting more American involvement in Syria argue that an al-Assad victory would increase Iran's influence, embolden Hizb Allah, and risk the United States' reputation as a superpower and its credibility among allies (and enemies) in the region.<sup>8</sup> Detractors already point to the U.S. failure to stem humanitarian abuses by the Syrian government, including al-Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons despite U.S. warnings that such use constituted crossing a "red line."<sup>9</sup> Others look at the United States' inability to get other major powers, especially Russia, on board to end the crisis quickly. Although no one argues that a post-Assad Syria will be a panacea for peace in the region, proponents of this camp think that the benefits of intervening outweigh the costs.<sup>10</sup>

5 Barack Obama, "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria," White House, August 18, 2011.

6 Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Lawmakers Call for Stronger US Action in Syria," *New York Times*, April 28, 2013.

7 Michele Kelemen, "U.S. Supplies for Syrian Rebels May Be Too Little, Too Late," National Public Radio, June 14, 2013; Tom A. Peter, "How Syria's Conflict Became More Complicated as US Debated Arms for Rebels," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 14, 2013.

8 Barry Pavel, "What Was Obama Thinking?" *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2013.

9 Benjamin J. Rhodes, "Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use," White House, June 13, 2013; James Ball, "Obama Issues Syria a 'Red Line' Warning on Chemical Weapons," *New York Times*, August 20, 2012.

10 For a spirited argument for intervention in Syria, see

The second camp is more skeptical about the rebel opposition and believes that the United States has wisely exercised restraint throughout the crisis, especially given the uncertainty of what a post-Assad Syria may look like. Retired Ambassador Ryan Crocker, former chief diplomat to Syria from 1998-2001 and no stranger to challenging situations after serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan, likened the current crisis in Syria to the massive wildfires raging in the American West: "You can't put them out. You can't stop them...That's kind of like Syria. We can't stop that war...What we can do, or should do, is everything possible we can to keep it from spreading."<sup>11</sup>

Many who side with Crocker's assessment suggest that the urge to "do something" should be tempered by the United States' first-hand knowledge of the tradeoffs, limitations, and uncertainty associated with military intervention during the last decade of war. In a recent letter to Congressman Eliot Engel, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs commented that "the use of U.S. military force can change the military balance [in Syria]...But it cannot resolve the underlying and historic ethnic, religious, and tribal issues that are fueling this conflict."<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, it clearly outlines the intent behind publishing a special issue of the *CTC Sentinel* focused exclusively on the Syrian crisis. Second, it frames the central themes surrounding the conflict, identifies future implications for political violence in the region, and highlights several notable findings from the issue's contributors.

#### Intent of this Issue

This special edition of the *CTC Sentinel* looks at the Syrian conflict from multiple angles, including analyses that closely examine the threats posed by violent non-state actors in the region. The contributors address key issues and debates while raising

Michael Doran and Max Boot, "Five Reasons to Intervene in Syria Now," *New York Times*, September 26, 2012.

11 Stephanie Gaskell, "Interview with Ryan Crocker: Assad Will Prevail 'Yard by Bloody Yard,'" *Defense One*, August 5, 2013; Ryan Crocker, "Containing the Fire in Syria," *Yale Global*, July 23, 2013.

12 Bradley Klapper, "Dempsey: Syrian Rebels Won't Back US Interests," Associated Press, August 21, 2013.

some important questions that so far have received limited attention. This edition purposefully avoids proposing any policy prescriptions. Rather, it identifies and analyzes the central actors and their strategic interests in an effort to inform the debate surrounding this wicked problem.

Selected authors in this edition were asked to view the Syrian civil war through the strategic lenses of some of the conflict's most important state actors; others were asked to "deep-dive" into the complicated non-state militant landscape and profile the most important groups fighting in Syria. While this issue does not exhaust all relevant angles of the conflict, grouping these different perspectives in a single issue will hopefully advance the collective understanding of the Syrian crisis and provide insight into the behavior and policies of the relevant actors.<sup>13</sup>

#### Central Themes and Pressing Concerns

Syria poses several significant security concerns for the United States and its allies. First, there are concerns about Syria's chemical weapons. Two months prior to the most recent use of chemical weapons in August, a U.S. report in June concluded that the al-Assad regime had used chemical weapons against rebel forces multiple times in the previous year.<sup>14</sup> No U.S. ally is more concerned about this development than Israel. As Arie Perliger explains in his article, controlling Syria's chemical weapons stockpile is a critical concern for Israeli security officials. Israel has already conducted at least one attack inside Syria to prevent these weapons from falling into the wrong hands, and more unilateral attacks can be expected if Israel feels positive control of these weapons is jeopardized in any way.<sup>15</sup>

13 For example, the issue does not include a separate article on the important role Russia plays in the crisis. For analyses that address Russia's strategic interests, see Radha Iyengar and Brian Fishman, *The Conflict in Syria: An Assessment of US Strategic Interests* (Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation, 2013); Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Many Interests in Syria," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 24, 2013; "Russia's Syrian Stance: Principled Self-Interest," *Strategic Comments* 2012:31 (2012).

14 Rhodes.

15 Dominic Evans and Oliver Holmes, "Israel Strikes Syria, Says Targeting Hezbollah Arms," Reuters, May 5, 2013; Arie Perliger, "Israel's Response to the Crisis in



Second, with possibly hundreds of foreign fighters returning to their home countries following the conflict in Syria, the United States and its allies must now contend with a potentially dangerous foreign fighter problem. Most are familiar with the spate of terrorist groups spawned in the years following the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to include al-Qa`ida. The same dynamics may emerge in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict.<sup>16</sup> Many fear that foreign fighters hailing from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa will return to their home countries hardened by battle and empowered by an extremist ideology. They may conduct attacks in their home countries or use their Syrian experience to export violence to other countries. Closer to home, American and European policymakers are also concerned about the return of hundreds of Western fighters who have also traveled to Syria to conduct jihad.<sup>17</sup>

Another obvious security concern for the United States and its allies is an expansion of the conflict beyond Syria's borders.<sup>18</sup> Low-level violence has already spilled over into Lebanon and Turkey, and the conditions that could ignite an escalation of the conflict are present in spades. A cursory analysis of the main actors and their strategic motivations, using many of the insights found later in this special issue, reveals the complexity of this crisis and paints a bleak picture for peace prospects in the near future.

### State and Non-State Actors in the Syrian Crisis

Iran, according to Karim Sadjadpour's analysis, views its alliance with Syria as an essential pillar of its grand strategy. He argues that Iran's strong support of the al-Assad regime is driven less by historical precedent and cultural affinity and more by realpolitik realities. As a result, Iran's commitment to al-Assad remains steadfast, and it is willing to spend significant blood and treasure to prevent a Sunni replacement government from taking root in Damascus.<sup>19</sup>

Iran could not achieve its goals in Syria without Lebanese Hizb Allah. Nicholas Blanford's article shows that the group's performance during the battle of Qusayr was a game-changer in the conflict, stopping the momentum of the rebels and showcasing the group's ability to execute offensive operations in an urban environment.<sup>20</sup> The addition of Hizb Allah drastically improved the fighting capability of the pro-Assad forces, but it may come at a steep cost for the Lebanese group, according to Matthew Levitt and Aaron Y. Zelin. After Hizb Allah announced its direct support of the al-Assad regime and spilled Sunni blood during the battle of Qusayr, its long-cultivated image of remaining above the sectarian fray is now tarnished.<sup>21</sup> By fighting alongside pro-Assad forces in Syria, Hizb Allah has also ignored the Lebanese government's policy of non-intervention in the conflict.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the group has had to recently implement "intensive security measures" in response to multiple car bomb attacks in Shi'a areas south of the Lebanese capital "to head off retaliatory attacks spurred by anger over its role in Syria."<sup>23</sup>

Looking at the rebel side, Aron Lund's article dissects the diverse and complicated Sunni non-state militant landscape in Syria. His analysis should give pause to those seeking simplistic narratives to describe the composition and motivations of the rebel opposition.<sup>24</sup> The complex mosaic of anti-Assad forces fighting in Syria is one of the chief reasons American policymakers are reluctant to provide more resources to the rebel cause, especially when the "big umbrella" of the opposition includes a group like Jabhat al-Nusra that has been designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs shared this concern recently to Representative Engel: "Syria is not about choosing between two sides but rather about choosing one among many sides. It is my belief that the side we choose must be ready to promote their interests and ours when the balance shifts in their favor. Today, they are not."<sup>25</sup>

Hugh Pope's article highlights Turkey's many challenges with the Syrian crisis. In addition to withstanding both conventional and unconventional attacks along its border from pro-Assad forces, Turkey has struggled to manage a massive influx of refugees from Syria.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Ankara's alleged support of Sunni rebel groups, both in and outside its borders, has heightened ethnic tensions at home.<sup>27</sup>

Jordan, like Turkey, is facing similar problems with Syrian refugees and has significant concerns about violence spilling across its border. Although it overtly backs rebel groups fighting against al-Assad's forces, Jordan is highly concerned about the concentration of Islamist extremist groups with ties to al-Qa`ida fighting along its border in southern Syria.<sup>28</sup> In June, the United

Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

16 For some interesting work on this issue, see Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice Between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107:1 (2013). Although he found evidence to suggest foreign fighter violence back home is less than conventional wisdom may suggest, foreign fighters that do conduct violence upon their return home are more effective than non-veterans.

17 Raffaello Pantucci, "British Fighters Joining the War in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:2 (2013); "Jihadis in Syria: A Salafi Shindig," *Economist*, June 18, 2013.

18 Halvard Buhaug and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Contagion or Confusion? Why Conflicts Cluster in Space," *International Studies Quarterly* 52:2 (2008).

19 Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

20 Nicholas Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

21 Scott Helfstein, "The Rise of Sectarian Populism," *National Interest*, July 18, 2013; Matthew Levitt and Aaron Y. Zelin, "Hizb Allah's Gambit in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

22 Levitt and Zelin.

23 Nicholas Blanford, "Under Threat of Attack, Hezbollah Turns Beirut Neighborhood into Fortress," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 25, 2013.

24 Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

25 Klapper. The original letter can be found on Rep. Engel's website at [www.democrats.foreignaffairs.house.gov/113/Letter\\_for\\_Rep\\_Engel\\_19\\_Aug\\_13.pdf](http://www.democrats.foreignaffairs.house.gov/113/Letter_for_Rep_Engel_19_Aug_13.pdf).

26 Hugh Pope, "Turkey's Tangled Syria Policy," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

27 Sophia Jones, "How the War in Syria Has Helped to Inspire Turkey's Protests," *Foreign Policy*, June 11, 2013.

28 Suleiman al-Khalidi and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Rebel Gains in Southern Syria Sharpen Jordan's Dilemma," *Reuters*, May 1, 2013.

States took active measures—deploying Patriot missile batteries and F-16s to Jordan—to reassure its long-standing regional ally.<sup>29</sup>

Iraq's involvement in the Syrian conflict spans multiple fronts. The United States has repeatedly called on Iraq's Nuri al-Maliki government to stop facilitating the transfer of weapons from Iran to al-Assad's forces through its borders.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the sectarian strife that has plagued Iraq over the last decade is now being exported to the Syrian conflict. Al-Qa`ida in Iraq has reportedly sent significant numbers of fighters to Syria and even attempted a well-documented "merge" with its jihadist counterpart in the Levant, Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>31</sup> To better understand Iraq's pro-Assad non-state actors, Phillip Smyth profiles and analyzes the numerous Shi'a proxy organizations from Iraq that have flocked to fight alongside Hizb Allah and other Shi'a militant groups in Syria.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the conflict in Syria is fueled in part by donor states hoping to influence the war's outcome in accordance with their own strategic interests. Russia has maintained its steadfast support of Syria, a long-standing ally, by funneling a steady stream of arms to the regime and refusing to join the United States and the West in calling for al-Assad's removal.<sup>33</sup> Wealthy Sunni Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have played important roles in bankrolling and arming specific rebel groups in their attempt to oust al-Assad and balance against their regional rival, Iran.<sup>34</sup>

### Implications on the Future of Political Violence in the Region

The Syrian crisis has important implications for future political violence in the region, regardless of what fate ultimately befalls the al-Assad regime. First, sectarian violence may now be the defining feature of the civil war. Rival storylines have portrayed the conflict differently: as the Syrian people's fight against an authoritarian dictator; as a Sunni majority taking what is rightfully theirs from an Alawite minority; or even the jihadist movement attacking the "near enemy." As Levitt and Zelin note in their article, the decision by Iran and Lebanese Hizb Allah to support al-Assad was an "all-in" moment. With Hizb Allah now in the fight, the Sunni-Shi'a dynamic overshadows other storylines and will likely prolong the conflict.

Second, coming on the heels of Usama bin Ladin's death in May 2011 and what appeared to be several peaceful transitions of power throughout the Middle East following the Arab Spring, the Syrian conflict was a timely lifeline of sorts for the broader jihadist movement. The Syrian conflict has attracted thousands of jihadist fighters from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa who are answering the call to jihad in Syria in numbers that other conflicts in Mali and Yemen have not been able to replicate. Additionally, the conflict in the Levant is unquestionably the most popular topic on jihadist web forums today. Viewed in conjunction with the Egyptian military's removal of President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from power, the Syrian civil war also helps reinforce the jihadist narrative that violence is the best way to remove apostate regimes and restore the caliphate.

Syria is indeed a wicked problem, and it will not be resolved in the near future. The conflict is complicated by sectarian issues, fears about chemical weapons, foreign fighters, and a web of non-state proxies that are supported by donor states from afar. We hope the remaining articles help those interested in Syria make better sense of the crisis.

*Major Bryan Price, Ph.D., is the Director of the Combating Terrorism Center. The viewpoints expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense.*

## Turkey's Tangled Syria Policy

By Hugh Pope

SINCE THE START of the civil war in Syria, Turkey has struggled to develop the best strategy to manage the crisis. The war has brought fatalities, shellfire, bombs, militias, sectarian tensions and uncertainty to Turkey's long southern border. Turkey has also welcomed at least 450,000 Syrian refugees, a number that could rise sharply.<sup>1</sup> Security problems are also multiplying for Turkey, with Syria's conflicts in a roiling stalemate and Syria itself turning into a failed state.

Turkey's security and humanitarian challenges are exacerbated by the historic and societal overlaps along the frontier—particularly in Hatay Province, where geography and population make it a Syrian microcosm in Turkey. Regionally, the Syria conflict exemplifies how Turkey's "zero problem" policy has become multiple problems.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Ankara allowed its bitter feud with Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and its open support for opposition fighters to box in its options. The crisis blocked Turkey's main trade routes to the Arab world and opened a new front in its Kurdish problem.<sup>3</sup>

This article examines Turkey's strategic interests and level of involvement in Syria, as well as the challenges and opportunities that Syria

29 Michael R. Gordon and Thom Shanker, "US to Keep Warplanes in Jordan, Pressuring Syria," *New York Times*, June 15, 2013.

30 Arshad Mohammad, "Top US Diplomat Kerry Asks Iraq to Stop Arms to Syria," Reuters, March 24, 2013.

31 Ryan Lucas, "Jabhat al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to al Qaeda, But Has Not Merged, Syrian Leader Says," *Huffington Post*, April 10, 2013.

32 Phillip Smyth, "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

33 Borshchevskaya.

34 C.J. Shivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Shipments Seen From Sudan to Syria Rebels," *New York Times*, August 12, 2013.

1 "Poor Transparency Shadows Turkey's Syria Refugee Policy," *Hurriyet*, May 27, 2013.

2 The "zero problem with neighbors" foreign policy term was coined by Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and is associated with the period of his ascendancy with the Justice and Development Party (AKP), in power since 2002. In practice, it reflects Turkey's ability between 1999 and 2008 to have much better relations with neighbors than had been possible in the Cold War era. Officially, it is a broad statement of good will, reconciles idealism and pragmatism, and reflects Turkey's belief that its relative economic strength and democratic advances should translate into a leading regional role. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' definition of the term is available at [www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa).

3 By mid-2013, however, a new engagement with Syrian Kurds gave Ankara more tools with which to work, if not the greater control that it seeks.

presents. It finds that whereas Turkey until 2008 was praised for its ability to speak to all regional players from Israel to Iran, the Syrian crisis has accelerated a new tendency for Ankara to be seen as a partisan actor. While Turkish leaders claim that their country has sufficient resources to be the region's main power, leverage over Syrian events is clearly limited. The government's sense of defensiveness has been increased by domestic, pro-secularist, anti-government unrest in June 2013, followed by the June 30 overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, a close Islamist ally of Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan government.

#### Turkey's Strategic Interests in Syria

Traditional Turkish policy in the Middle East and elsewhere has been primarily based on defensive security, commercial opportunities, energy supplies, and if possible some prestige. Policy choices in the last few years of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule, however, have become more ideological, especially in seeking partnerships with Sunni Muslim actors such as Qatar, and sometimes implicitly reflecting a Sunni Turkish version of the Islamist worldview both at home and abroad.<sup>4</sup> Ankara has explicitly chosen one or more foreign Sunni Muslim internal players as a partner: it has moved closer to Sunni Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, has been hostile to Iraq's Shi'a Muslim prime minister, preferred Hamas among all Palestinian factions, and is one of the only states to support the ousted Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. In the case of Syria, this new policy has become adventurous, including support for Syria's Muslim Brotherhood and the Sunni armed opposition groups.

Syria—a core part of the Ottoman Empire for four centuries until the First World War—has always been a cornerstone of Turkey's Middle East strategy. This is due to Syria's geographic position, its

role during the past century as a leader of the hard line Arab resistance against the encroachments of Israel, and the prestige of Damascus in Arab opinion. After Iraqi internal security collapsed with the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, Syria also became the main truck route for Turkey's Middle Eastern exports. Syria's fulcrum role in the Arab world also made it a multiplier of Turkish policy—a redoubtable problem when Ankara-Damascus ties have soured.

For instance, squabbles over the demarcation line of the 570-mile border between the two states have long strained Ankara-Damascus ties. During the Cold War, NATO member Turkey and Soviet ally Syria marked the frontier with minefields, barbed wire and watchtowers, built dams on major cross-border rivers such as the Euphrates and Orontes, and accused each other of backing domestic armed insurgents.<sup>5</sup>

In 1998-1999, after Turkey threatened to invade Syria over its support (since 1984) for the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Damascus expelled PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.<sup>6</sup> There followed an extraordinary turnaround. Where Syria had been the main obstacle blocking Turkey's progress in the Arab world, it became Turkey's partner. The late 2000s saw frequent public closeness between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Syria became the poster child of Turkey's late 2000s policy of "zero problems" with neighbors, leading the way with freer travel, trade agreements, infrastructure integration and regular high-level political meetings.<sup>7</sup> In a way, this was a continuation of Turkey's traditional policy of engaging the Middle East, but in a warmer and more friendly guise: seeking neutrality, able to speak to all parties including Israel, and respecting existing borders.

After becoming increasingly embroiled in disputes with Israel from 2009 onwards, Turkey's neutrality began to unravel.<sup>8</sup> When Syrians began demonstrating against al-Assad in March 2011, Turkey tried for months to stave off the budding rebellion, with Erdogan pressing al-Assad to reform in repeated telephone calls and visits to Damascus by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.<sup>9</sup> When al-Assad brushed this advice aside, Turkey executed another 180 degree turn: it publicly sponsored an opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) at a meeting in Istanbul in August 2011.<sup>10</sup> In September 2011, Erdogan called unequivocally for al-Assad to relinquish power, saying he had been betrayed by al-Assad's broken promises and angered at the regime's attacks on civilian protesters.<sup>11</sup> Turkey was convinced by an international consensus that the Damascus regime would fall quickly, and it did not want to lag behind any foreign intervention, a "latecomer" role that limited its leverage after Libya's regime change.

Turkey's quick recognition of the SNC umbrella of political groups and opposition militias as the official representative of the Syrian opposition in November 2011 was encouraged by its established relationship with the SNC's main member, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>12</sup> Although foreign backers tried to make the SNC non-

8 Having seen its good relations with all sides result in being trusted as a mediator between Israel and Syria in 2008, Turkey turned angrily on Israel after its attack on Gaza at the end of that year. Relations hit a new low in 2010 when Israel killed eight Turks and a Turkish-American on the high seas, part of an international convoy led by a Turkish non-governmental organization trying to break Israel's blockade on Gaza. For the latter incident, see Isabel Kershner, "Deadly Israeli Raid Draws Condemnation," *New York Times*, May 31, 2010.

9 For a detailed chronology of Turkish actions on Syria since March 2011, see Asli Ilgt and Rochelle Davis, "The Many Roles of Turkey in the Syrian Crisis," Middle East Research and Information Project, January 28, 2013.

10 "After Istanbul Meeting, Syrian Dissidents Form 'National Council' to Oust Assad," Agence France-Presse, August 23, 2011.

11 "The time of autocracies is over," said Erdogan. "Totalitarian regimes are disappearing. The rule of the people is coming." See "Syria's Oppressors Will Not Survive, Erdogan Says in Libya," *Today's Zaman*, September 16, 2011.

12 "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood Open to Turkish 'Role,'" Agence France-Presse, November 17, 2011.

4 "Cemevis [Alevi prayer houses] are not places of worship, they are centres where cultural events take place," Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in an interview on Turkish television channel ATV on August 5, 2012. Also see Semih Idiz, "The Sunnification of Turkish Foreign Policy," *al-Monitor*, March 1, 2013, in which Idiz said, "The same Turkey that once hoped to be a peace broker in its region is now increasingly seen as inflaming sectarian divisions and fuelling instability."

5 Hugh Pope and Nicole Pope, *Turkey Unveiled: A History of Modern Turkey* (New York: Overlook TP, 1999), pp. 270-271.

6 Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

7 "Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints," International Crisis Group, April 7, 2010, pp. 4-14.



sectarian, it never managed to be fully representative, partly because Syria's Kurds and secular groups remained suspicious of Turkey's involvement, motives, and ethnic and religious priorities, and some gravitated to other groups before a new umbrella organization, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, was established in Qatar in November 2012.<sup>13</sup>

Supporting the SNC and then the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces also signaled an end to Turkey's efforts to be viewed as a Muslim power that rose above sectarianism, and a subsequent slide in its regional influence. There have still been signs of the former neutrality—in 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan visited Iraqi Shi'a shrines, clerics and politicians, and Foreign Minister Davutoglu clearly tried to make the Syrian opposition broad-based.<sup>14</sup> Yet the Syrian crisis pushed Turkey deeper into alignment with mainly Sunni Muslim opposition fighters and conservative Sunni powers, notably Qatar. In Iraq, another key border state for Turkey, Ankara felt forced into deeper opposition to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whom it increasingly saw as an irredeemably pro-Iran, Shi'a actor and supporter of the al-Assad regime.<sup>15</sup>

#### Level of Involvement in Syria

Military tensions began to rise in 2012. In June, a Turkish reconnaissance jet crashed in Syrian waters, with Syria saying it shot the plane down and Turkey responding with initially fiery rhetoric and more aggressive rules of engagement.<sup>16</sup> As anti-Assad rebels

seized control of northern Syria, five Turkish townspeople were killed and nine wounded by a stray shell in the town of Akcakale on October 3.<sup>17</sup> On October 4, the Turkish parliament approved a bill that would allow the government to order troops abroad, including to Syria.<sup>18</sup> Over the next nine months, stray bullets and shells killed and injured more people in the

### **“The Syrian crisis pushed Turkey deeper into alignment with mainly Sunni Muslim opposition fighters and conservative Sunni powers, notably Qatar.”**

eastern Turkish town of Ceylanpinar.<sup>19</sup> Turkish artillery batteries were moved to the border area and have returned fire, sometimes for hours on end. The most dramatic single event was a May 11, 2013, car bombing in the border town of Reyhanli that killed 53 people and which Turkey blamed on Syrian covert action.<sup>20</sup> By mid-August 2013, an unofficial casualty toll maintained by the International Crisis Group counted 74 dead in Turkey from Syria-related border violence since 2011.<sup>21</sup>

Turkey quickly requested and in January 2013 received NATO protection from possible Syrian attack, with American, Dutch, and German Patriot missile defense systems deployed to protect major cities.<sup>22</sup> Nominally this was a measure against Syria's presumed chemical-tipped missiles, but NATO public support was

even more important as psychological support at home and a general deterrent to Damascus. Ankara attempted to persuade its Western allies to take a more proactive role in the war, calling at times for a no-fly zone to protect the rebel-held areas of the country and for stronger backing for opposition militias. It allowed Gulf states and Western intelligence agencies to support, finance and arm opposition militias.<sup>23</sup>

It is not clear how much arming and training Turkey did independently, aside from some groups close to its border, as well as multiple reports of Turkey allowing an Islamist group to cross the border to attack a Syrian Kurdish militia in November 2012.<sup>24</sup> The Turkish government also faces considerable if muted domestic opposition to its Syria policy, with one poll showing only one-third of the Turkish population supporting Ankara's anti-Assad Syria policy, and 43% saying that Turkey should have remained neutral.<sup>25</sup> For now, several refugee camps and the Turkish towns near them are frequently used by Syrian opposition fighters as off-duty resting places to visit their families, receive medical services and purchase supplies.<sup>26</sup>

#### Challenges and Opportunities

Ankara has seized one opportunity from the crisis in Syria: to launch a process to solve the Kurdish problem and the PKK insurgency. This has given Turkey some leverage over the situation in northern Syria, where the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD) has primacy over the Syrian Kurds. At times, Turkish government officials explicitly stated that their motive in seeking reconciliation was to bolster a regional standing that had been hobbled by the continued PKK and Turkish army fighting in Turkey. In July 2013, Turkish

13 Sebnem Arsu and Tim Arango, “Turks Grant Recognition to Coalition of Syrians,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2012.

14 Personal interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

15 After Erdogan intervened in support of Iraq's Sunni leaders in April 2012, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki declared Turkey was turning into an “interfering” and “enemy” state. Erdogan then said that “there's no need to let Maliki steal the show or gain prestige. Bad words implicate only those who use them.” See “Tough Words from Erdogan on Maliki and Kılıçdaroglu,” *Radikal* [Istanbul], April 21, 2012.

16 “Turkey Says Syria Down its Air Force Jet,” *Today's Zaman*, June 23, 2012; “Army on High Alert on Syrian Border as Turkey Warns of Retaliation,” *Today's Zaman*,

June 26, 2012.

17 “Mortar from Syria Kills Five Family Members in Turkey,” *Today's Zaman*, October 3, 2012.

18 “Mandate to Send Troops Abroad Gets Criticism from Opposition,” *Today's Zaman*, June 26, 2012.

19 “Fourth Victim of Syrian Stray Bullets Buried in Ceylanpinar,” *Today's Zaman*, August 4, 2013.

20 “Tensions High as Funerals Held in Hatay,” *Hurriyet*, May 12, 2013; “Turkey Blames Syria for Border Gate Attack,” *Hurriyet*, March 11, 2013.

21 The International Crisis Group provided these statistics to the author in August 2013.

22 “U.S. to Send 2 Missile Units to Turkey to Deter Syrians,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2012.

23 “Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey,” International Crisis Group, April 30, 2013, p. 37.

24 “Islamists Fighting Kurds in Syria Admit to Turkish Military Support,” *Rudaw* [Iraqi Kurdistan], February 6, 2013; Halil M. Karaveli, “Turkey, the Unhelpful Ally,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2013.

25 See the Kadir Has University poll in January 2013, available at [www.khas.edu.tr/news/799/1278/Khas-2012-Tuerkiye-Sosyal-Siyasal-Eglimler-Arastirmasi-Sonuclari-Aciklandi.html](http://www.khas.edu.tr/news/799/1278/Khas-2012-Tuerkiye-Sosyal-Siyasal-Eglimler-Arastirmasi-Sonuclari-Aciklandi.html).

26 “Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey,” p. 36.

officials also had apparently productive meetings with the main Syrian Kurdish militia leader, Salih Muslim, of the PYD. Yet a variety of domestic challenges in mid-2013 distracted the Ankara government, and doubts now cloud the future of Turkey's relationship with the Kurds—a problem that since 1984 has killed more than 30,000 people, cost Turkey \$300 billion, hamstrung its democratization efforts and damaged its relationship with the European Union.<sup>27</sup>

Separately, one of Turkey's major challenges involves the presence of 450,000 Syrian refugees, most of whom are in Turkish border provinces, nearly half in 17 camps and the rest in towns and villages.<sup>28</sup> Turkey has spent an estimated \$1 billion so far, but has only received one tenth of that in international aid due to disagreements with donors over control of the funds.<sup>29</sup> Another 100,000 Syrians are stuck in insecure, often unpleasant conditions on the Syrian side of the border,<sup>30</sup> and the United Nations predicts the total number of those fleeing could double or triple in 2013.<sup>31</sup> Opposition fighters and Syrians with passports can cross the border freely, but Ankara allows incoming refugees only when there is room in camps.

Another major challenge is receiving the external support Turkey needs as the refugee crisis becomes larger and more protracted. Turkey has begun to register a few more international aid organizations, and it should allow UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations greater access. Turkey could also take more steps to speed international aid shipments destined for the far greater humanitarian problems inside Syria.

One aspect of the de facto refugee situation in Turkey is the way Syrians living outside refugee camps in Turkey seem to be fitting in as a new working class. There seems to be few obstacles to their long-term integration, but the May 2013 car bomb in Reyhanli, where many Syrian refugees live, did trigger local demonstrations. The presence of largely Sunni Muslim refugees is exacerbating sensitive ethnic and sectarian balances, particularly in Hatay Province, where more than one-third of the population is of Arab Alevi descent and directly related to Syria's Alawites.<sup>32</sup> The Turkish authorities have so far defused tensions in Hatay that had peaked with demonstrations in September 2012.<sup>33</sup> Much of the problem appears to be based on misperceptions and fears—including possibly exaggerated reports that rival communities are arming.

The security challenge naturally looms large. Turkey has little capacity to solve the intractable problems inside Syria if it acts alone, and it is unlikely to stage a solo military intervention. It is bound by its membership in NATO's defensive alliance and is responsible for the safety of the American, Dutch and German Patriot missile systems symbolizing that solidarity. Actual interventions have so far been confined to returning fire if shells or bullets do damage in Turkey and quiet support for the armed Syrian opposition.

Still, these policies remain open to debate. Increased arming of opposition fighters seems unlikely to enable the rebels to topple the regime quickly, and these militias have become enmeshed in other problems, including fighting among themselves. AKP leaders' repeated statements about the glories of the Ottoman Empire that collapsed in 1918 and a leading historical and economic role in its Sunni Muslim neighborhood is at odds with the present reality that it now has an uncontrollable, fractured, radicalized "no-man's land" on its doorstep.<sup>34</sup>

32 According to interviews conducted by the author in January 2013, local politicians claim the one-third figure, but activists such as Ali Yeral, an Arab Alevi leader and founding president of the Ehl-i Beyt Kültür ve Dayanışma Vakfı, think that half the province is Alevi.

33 "Shabiha Behind Pro-Assad Rally in Hatay, Daily Claims," *Today's Zaman*, September 3, 2012.

34 Ahmet Davutoglu, speech at Dicle University, March 15, 2013.

One bright spot in this gloomy picture has been the economic resilience of the Turkish border area, a principal beneficiary of the past decade's Turkey-Syria trade boom. In Hatay Province, for example, despite real damage in some sectors, local businesses have adapted remarkably. Some have even pioneered a new roll-on/roll-off truck convoy route by sea to Haifa, across Israel and the West Bank to the Gulf.<sup>35</sup> In the end, overall exports and economic output in the province were both down only 1% from a year earlier.<sup>36</sup>

### Preferred Strategic Endstate

From the moment they turned against the Bashar al-Assad regime in August 2011, Prime Minister Erdogan and his AKP government have been betting on a quick resolution that would put into power representatives of what it sees as Syria's natural 70% majority of Sunni Muslims.<sup>37</sup> Today, Ankara has not retreated from the position that al-Assad should relinquish power, despite strong evidence that the Syrian leader will neither step down nor extend his control over the half of the country he does not control.

The emotional and domestic policy commitment to this policy means it is unlikely to change. A new Turkish government in 2014, however, would likely return to a more cautious, traditional stance that is more respectful of existing borders. Even now, the current government is trying to harden parts of the border with barbed wire to reassert control. Army units have even opened fire on groups—that official statements refer to as "smugglers"—trying to cross the border.<sup>38</sup>

Turkey adopted its aggressive strategy toward Syria and its generous but expensive hosting of refugees for

27 For discussion of casualty figures, see "Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency," International Crisis Group, September 20, 2011, p. 1. Prime Minister Erdogan gave the figure for the cost in "The Democratic Initiative Process," Justice and Development Party, February 2010.

28 "Poor Transparency Shadows Turkey's Syria Refugee Policy," *Hurriyet*, May 27, 2013.

29 "Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey," pp. 13-14.

30 Ibid., p. 30.

31 "Guterres: UNHCR Not to Assume Operational Role in Turkish Refugee Camps," *Today's Zaman*, March 10, 2013.

35 Due to a special agreement with Israel, Turkish trucks that used to transit Syria to the Middle East can now bypass that country by using a special ferry service to the Israeli port of Haifa. From Haifa they drive in secure convoys through Israel, the Palestinian West Bank until they reach Jordan to continue their journey.

36 Didem Collinsworth, "Hatay: The Syrian Crisis and a Case of Turkish Economic Resilience," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 12:1 (2013).

37 Jonathan Randal, "Syria's Threatened Minorities," *New York Times*, May 4, 2012.

38 "Turkish Army Places Tanks on Syria Border to Deter Smugglers," Bloomberg, August 15, 2013.



several understandable reasons. These include: the wish to aid those fleeing the fighting, the belief that many Syrians want to return home as soon as it is safe to do so, the unexpectedly massive scale of the emergency, and encouragement from international partners who have promised much support but given little. Yet a more controversial reason luring Turkish policymakers deeper into Syria's problems is a sense of historical responsibility for parts of its regional backyard that until 1918 were part of the Ottoman Empire, which Turkey views as its predecessor state.

Turkish nationalists have never fully accepted the legitimacy of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that drew the border that became a reality after the international recognition of the new Republic of Turkey in 1923. Turkey engineered the annexation of Alexandretta Province, which was part of the French-mandate of Syria, in 1939 (now the Turkish province of Hatay). Going further than any previous Turkish government, Foreign Minister Davutoglu is repeatedly on record saying that Turkey would like to overthrow the "colonialist" Sykes-Picot order.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, it is not clear what border or regional arrangement with which Turkey seeks to replace it, given that resurrecting any version of the Ottoman Empire is out of the question due to Turkey's lack of power and antipathy to the idea in the region.

Turkey has no policy to annex neighboring, formerly Ottoman territories, but it is seeking more influence, economic access, and control. Turkish officials do not talk of changing borders, but recognize that their actions are blurring them.<sup>40</sup> One hint at the kind of new approach to be expected is that senior Turkish officials make it clear that they are building up a close relationship with Iraq's Kurdistan

Regional Government (KRG), including deals for energy pipelines to Turkey, independent of the relationship with Baghdad and with less concern than in the past for consequences for the territorial unity of Iraq.<sup>41</sup> It is not clear how this pattern might be reproduced in Syria; there is no pre-existing Kurdish regional structure (as was the case for Iraq's KRG since 1974) and the main Syrian Kurdish militia says it has no federal aim.

### Conclusion

Turkey's Syria policy is in jeopardy, with few obvious opportunities and many grave problems. A bet since 2011 that al-Assad would be ousted quickly has not paid off. Turkey has blurred its border with Syria and already suffered blowback on its own territory in terms of refugees, bomb attacks and ethnic tensions. It has few levers over the emerging mosaic of militias, radical groups and impoverished people just across its border.

The catastrophic problems of Syria since 2011 would have been a severe test for any Turkish government, coming as they did in the wake of the uprisings that have rocked the Arab world. A variety of aggravating factors have made it even worse for the ruling AKP. It had invested in the al-Assad regime and in the idea of a region characterized by free trade, free movement of people, infrastructure integration and high-level political harmony—all of which remain idealistic dreams at this point. The AKP's obvious later support for the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist elements in the Syrian opposition signaled a sectarian tendency to intervene in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or against the Shi'a prime minister in Iraq—both of these moves have had limited success and have diminished Turkey's image as an impartial and strong regional power.

Many of Turkey's problems linked to Syria's strategic quicksand remain unresolved. Ankara's refugee policy has come at great domestic cost, requires Turkey to keep some refugees from crossing the border and is probably

not sustainable if Turkey is forced to accept another large exodus from Syria. Turkey has adopted language implying its desire to redraw the borders of the Middle East, which has stoked regional suspicions. Turkey's traditional Western alliances have been weakened by the AKP's authoritarian tendencies and scornful rhetoric toward the European Union.<sup>42</sup> Although a sharp difference in Syrian priorities has not been a big issue between Ankara and Washington, there is a perception in the United States of an overconfident Turkish prime minister acting against stated U.S. wishes for international support for a united Iraq.

At the same time, Turkey cannot be expected to disassociate itself from the turmoil in its neighborhood, especially given the way its regional rivals Iran and Russia are standing so firmly behind the Damascus regime. Humane, generous and flexible policies have also made Turkey by far the best place to be a Syrian refugee.

New contacts with the Syrian Kurdish PYD militia, the peace talks with the PKK, and better relations with Iraq's KRG all show a new pragmatism that can at least add predictability to areas just across its borders. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the Syrian crisis has done great damage to Turkey's hopes and plans for a Middle East that would offer it heightened security, sustained new commercial opportunities, and increased leadership and prestige.

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<sup>39</sup> In a speech at Dicle University on March 15, 2013, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said, "The future cannot be constructed, first with their Sykes-Picot maps, then with colonial methods, and then with their newly concocted state understandings based on artificial maps and mutually hostile nationalist ideologies. We will break the mould drawn for us by Sykes-Picot" (author's translation).

<sup>40</sup> "Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey," p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Turkey has long worked with the more conservative Iraqi Kurdish leadership in the hope of outflanking the more radical, left-wing Turkish Kurds of the PKK.

<sup>42</sup> "EU-Turkey Relations on Edge after Germany Blocks Talks," EU Observer, June 21, 2013; "Turkish PM Slams EU, Threatens to Freeze Ties," *Hurriyet*, July 19, 2013.

## Israel's Response to the Crisis in Syria

By Arie Perliger

ON MAY 1, 2013, the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Ron Prosor, visited the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In his comments to cadets, he described in general terms Israel's position on various Middle Eastern policy issues. He emphasized Israel's desire to continue promoting the conciliation process with its neighbors and the Palestinians. When asked about Israel's position regarding Syria's unconventional weapons, the ambassador stated that Israel would not allow a situation in which forces hostile to Israel took possession of these weapons. The short, but clear answer provided a glimpse into the major factors that have shaped Israel's approach to Syria in the last few decades as well as during the current crisis. It also reflected Israel's concerns with the growing strength of existing sub-state entities like Lebanese Hizb Allah and newer entities such as the al-Qa`ida-linked Jabhat al-Nusra.

These developments raise a series of interesting questions. Why did Israel tolerate the Syrian government's possession of chemical weapons given its hostility to Israel, but is willing to use extreme measures to prevent sub-state groups from taking possession of those same weapons? Is there a strategic rationale behind the recent Israeli military strikes in Syria? Why does it appear that the Israeli leadership is ambivalent about the potential end-state of the ongoing civil war in Syria?

To answer these questions, this article introduces the major foundations of Israel's security doctrine and its relevancy to the civil war in Syria, and it analyzes Israel's actions and policies in response to the Syrian crisis. It finds that the crisis in Syria represents a "lose-lose" outcome for Israel as it serves as a breeding ground for new emerging threats and provides growing opportunities for existing hostile actors.

### Israel's National Security Doctrine

Israel's national security doctrine was mainly developed by Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who together with a small number of military and political leaders established its main principles as early as the 1950s. Most of these principles are still accepted today within the Israeli political and security realms and include: 1) the presumption that Israel faces a continuous existential threat, which demands an active security approach; b) the extreme imbalance between Israel and its neighbors in terms of population compels Israel to construct its army as a militia-style force, where almost the entire relevant population can be enlisted in case of a crisis (via reserve units), while in times of peace the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), based on compulsory service, sustain most of the security burden; c) the use of reserve forces may impact the small Israeli economy severely, thus Israel must aspire to achieve quick and decisive results in its military campaigns; d) decisive victories are required to deter Israel's enemies, and deterrence is essential for a country without real strategic depth; e) Israel's lack of strategic depth means that combat must take place on enemy territory.<sup>1</sup>

The final component of Israel's doctrine has led not just to an emphasis on the importance of early warning, but also Israel's preference to attack first, even at the cost of directly violating the sovereignty of neighboring countries and accusations of unprovoked aggression. Most aspects of this doctrine are clearly evident in the current Syrian crisis.

### Syria: An Existential Threat?

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, Israel's conventional military superiority has become increasingly apparent. During this period, a growing number of non-Israeli sources also indicated that Israel was able to develop a significant arsenal of nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early

1990s (at that time the most important sponsor of Israel's main rivals in the region) further solidified the asymmetry between Israel and its neighboring countries. Considering these changes in the security environment and the declining probability of conventional wars, the Israeli security establishment started to pay closer attention to the efforts of some Arab countries to

**"The crisis in Syria represents a 'lose-lose' outcome for Israel as it serves as a breeding ground for new emerging threats and provides growing opportunities for existing hostile actors."**

compensate their disadvantage in terms of conventional and unconventional power by developing unconventional weapons programs. The Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear facility near Baghdad in June 1981 was a first sign of Israel's determination to address actively these new developments.<sup>3</sup> Ongoing Israeli efforts against the Iranian nuclear program are another example. Thus, the superiority of Israel's conventional power has not led to abandoning the idea that Israel is under existential threat. Rather, the Israeli security establishment gradually modified the concept to prevent neighboring countries from developing unconventional weapons systems.

While the most acute concern for Israel is still Iran, Syria was always a close second with its ongoing investment in, and development of, a ballistic missiles program to achieve what former Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad termed "strategic parity" with Israel.<sup>4</sup> In the early 1980s, Syria was successful in acquiring Scud-C missiles (with an operational range of 320-370 miles)

1 Arie Perliger, "Democracy in an Ongoing Conflict: The Politics of Defence in Israel," in James Forest and Isaiah Wilson eds., *Defence Politics: International and Comparative Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 293-307.

2 David Stout, "Israel's Nuclear Arsenal Vexed Nixon," *New York Times*, November 29, 2007.

3 David K. Shipler, "Israeli Jets Destroy Iraqi Atomic Reactor; Attack Condemned by U.S. and Arab Nations," *New York Times*, June 9, 1981.

4 Michael Eisenstadt, *Arming for Peace: Syria's Elusive Quest for Strategic Parity* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992).

from North Korea as well as the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Later that decade, these were supplemented with the more advanced Soviet OTR-21 (120-mile range) and OTR-23 (310-mile range) missiles.<sup>6</sup> An important step for the Syrian program was the construction of the first two Syrian missile complexes in Aleppo and Hama in the 1990s, as well as the recent development of its Scud-D program, using technologies provided from North Korea, Iran and possibly Russia.<sup>7</sup>

While expanding its arsenal of ballistic missiles, Syria also stepped up its chemical weapons production. According to Israeli sources, Syria experimented with an indigenous chemical production capability already in the early 1970s (mainly at the Scientific Studies and Research Center, a facility near Damascus).<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, a more systematic production of nerve agents likely began in the 1980s, including the installation of a chemical warhead-fitting in the Aleppo complex.<sup>9</sup> By the early 1990s, both the international news media and statements by U.S. officials indicated that Syria had converted several agrochemical factories into sarin gas production facilities in places such as Homs, Latakia and Palmyra.<sup>10</sup> Today, it is believed that Syria holds one of the largest arsenals of chemical weapons, while experimenting with various chemical substances, including mustard gas, sarin gas and the more toxic (nerve gas) V series.<sup>11</sup>

### The Israeli Response

Until recently, Israel showed limited interest in actively countering Syria's efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities. To begin with, the Syrian focus on chemical weapons, which, despite their potential for causing mass fatalities are not comparable to the potential harm from nuclear weapons, contributed to a more patient approach by Israel, especially since for many years it was unclear how much progress the Syrian regime really made in fitting chemical agents to ballistic warheads. Second, the vast Israeli investment in defensive measures during the first Gulf War (e.g., equipping the entire population with gas masks and the formation of the IDF's Home Front Command) provided more leverage in responding to this threat and may have contributed to the limited public demand to act against Syria's efforts to develop chemical weapons. Third, the proximity between the countries, combined with Israel's military superiority, enabled in the eyes of Israeli policymakers effective deterrence that lowered significantly the chances of Syria using these weapons against Israel. Finally, the significant progress in the conciliation process between Israel and other Arab entities (Egypt, Jordan, the Oslo Accords) during the 1990s and 2000s, including several phases of negotiations between Israel and Syria, did not facilitate a sense of urgency regarding Syria's chemical arsenal.

Several developments, however, led to changes in the status quo and eventually to a more aggressive approach by Israel. The first was the decision of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2001 to utilize his close relations with North Korea to construct a nuclear facility in northeastern Syria.<sup>12</sup> The Israeli establishment was shocked when Mossad agents copied the hard disk of a member of the Syrian atomic committee and discovered evidence of a Syrian nuclear facility in mid-2007.<sup>13</sup> For Israel, Syria's shift into the nuclear realm signaled a severe escalation. Similar to the case of Iraq in 1981, and today with Iran, Israel's

military and political class were united in their opposition to a hostile polity acquiring nuclear capabilities. When on July 13, 2007, President George W. Bush reportedly informed Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that the United States would not use military force to eliminate the facility, Israel decided to act alone.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the decision to bomb the Syrian reactor in September 2007 came despite the fact that there were significant concerns within the Israeli establishment about possible retaliation by Syria and the potential for the outbreak of war.<sup>15</sup> Yet the bombing of the Syrian facility may not have been the only Israeli response. On August 1, 2008, Syrian Brigadier General Mohammed Suleiman, one of al-Assad's close associates and the figure allegedly responsible for managing the Syrian nuclear program, was shot dead at his chalet in the Rimal al-Zahabiya resort area nine miles north of the port city of Tartus.<sup>16</sup> While some sources indicate that his death was a result of an "inside job," other sources are confident that snipers of the IDF's elite "Shayetet 13" unit were responsible for his assassination.<sup>17</sup> While the repercussions of General Suleiman's death are difficult to discern, if reports about his expertise and role in managing the facility are accurate, then his assassination likely made potential efforts to reconstruct the nuclear program more difficult.

The Israeli leadership confronted a new set of challenges with the outbreak of civil war in Syria that further pushed it to adopt a more aggressive approach. The first is the potential for Lebanese Hizb Allah and other actors to acquire advanced weapons systems from Syria, including surface-to-air missiles, ballistic missiles and chemical warheads. Israel maximized its intelligence and operational capabilities to ensure that WMDs would not spill over to hostile non-state actors. Although the picture is still unclear, since the beginning of the

5 See the "Missile" listing on the Syria country profile published by the Nuclear Threat Initiative, available at [www.nti.org/country-profiles/syria/delivery-systems](http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/syria/delivery-systems).

6 Magnus Normak et al., "Syria and WMD Incentives and Capabilities," Swedish Defense Research Agency, June 2004, p. 69.

7 Angelo M. Codevilla, "Missiles, Defense and Israel," in Arie Stav ed., *The Threat of Ballistic Missiles in the Middle East* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2004) p. 61.

8 David Eshel, "Syria's Chemical Weapons Proliferation Hydra," Defense Update News Analysis, September 23, 2007. Israel bombed this facility in January and May 2013.

9 Anthony H. Cordesman, "Syrian Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Overview," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2, 2008.

10 "Special Weapons Facilities," Global Security, undated, available at [www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/syria/facility.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/syria/facility.htm).

11 "Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions for the Period 1

January to 30 June 2002," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2002, p. 4.

12 *True Faces*, Channel 10, Israel, August 26, 2012.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. These comments were made by Elliott Abrams during the *True Faces* interview.

15 David E. Sanger and Mark Mazzetti, "Israel Struck Syrian Nuclear Project, Analysts Say," *New York Times*, October 14, 2007.

16 Nicholas Blanford, "The Mystery Behind a Syrian Murder," *Time Magazine*, August 7, 2008.

17 *True Faces*; "The Long Road to Syria," *Yedioth Ahrenoth*, August 26, 2010.



civil war in Syria Israel has attacked a shipment of surface-to-surface missiles traveling from Iran to Hizb Allah near al-Hamah on January 29, 2013,<sup>18</sup> a shipment of sophisticated anti-aircraft weaponry (probably Iran's Fateh-110) that was stationed in a warehouse at Damascus International Airport and was intended for Hizb Allah on May 3, 2013,<sup>19</sup> and Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center near Damascus on May 5, 2013, a facility possibly involved in the development of biological and chemical weapons.<sup>20</sup>

These attacks were not just intended to prevent militant actors from acquiring strategic weapons that could undermine Israel's ability to maintain the status quo on the Lebanese and Syrian borders, but they also reflected Israel's concerns about implementing its security doctrine. In other words, these new weapons would have allowed Hizb Allah (and potentially other actors) to speed up processes that started to take shape in the last two decades, including: a) the growing inability of Israel to prevent the war in Syria from spilling into the Israeli home front, a development that has severe implications on Israel's ability to mobilize reserve units effectively in case of crises, as well as on the Israeli public's resiliency; b) growing difficulties (as seen also during the 2006 war in Lebanon) to achieve a "decisive victory" in the traditional sense of the term of "eliminating" the military capabilities of the enemy; c) the latter impacts the ability to achieve effective deterrence, hence further narrowing military options in the future; d) these developments may lead to Israel's inability to control the volume and expansion of future conflicts, increasing unpredictability, and thus the Israeli inclination to be even more vigilant and proactive in initiating preliminary attacks.

18 Isabel Kershner and Michael R. Gordon. "Israeli Air-strike in Syria Targets Arms Convoy, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, January 30, 2013.

19 Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "Israel Bombs Outskirts of Damascus for Second Time in Recent Days," *Washington Post*, May 4, 2013.

20 Dominic Evans and Oliver Holmes, "Israel Strikes Syria, Says Targeting Hezbollah Arms," Reuters, May 5, 2013; Alexander Marquardt, "Israel Tries to Cool Tension With Syria After Missile Attacks," ABC News, May 6, 2013. Israel also attacked the facility on January 30, 2013.

Israel is also concerned about the end state of the war in Syria. On the one hand, there is a risk that a militant Islamist regime will replace al-Assad's government. In the eyes of the Israeli security establishment, the effectiveness of conventional deterrence against such a regime is in doubt, thus the chances of escalation and that regime's usage of WMD is higher. Moreover, an "Islamic republic" in Syria may provide violent Salafist groups another platform to engage in militant activities against Israel (in addition to the Gaza Strip). These concerns are reflected in the IDF's plans to form a new regional compulsory division that will be responsible for the protection of the Golan Heights from infiltration of hostile forces, as well as developing response mechanisms against artillery attacks on Israeli population centers in the region. On the other hand, a victory for al-Assad's forces does not mean a return to the pre-war status quo. A weak al-Assad regime, highly dependent on Iran and Hizb Allah, will become a severe liability, further solidify an eastern front against Israel, and provide Hizb Allah more resources that eventually may lead to the resumption of violence in Lebanon.

### Conclusion

For Israel, the crisis in Syria represents a "lose-lose" situation. Yet there are already low expectations that a more pragmatic regime will emerge following the current war. Moreover, Israel is highly concerned about the potential eruption of a war of attrition in the Golan Heights that will challenge Israel across three fronts—the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

In all these arenas, Israel has limited capabilities to project its superior conventional capabilities and to implement the fundamental principles of its security doctrine. Therefore, it is not surprising that voices from Israel, while somewhat inconsistent regarding preferred outcomes of the war, are all indicating growing concern that as bad as the situation is now, it will likely only become worse.

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## Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria

By Karim Sadjadpour

THROUGHOUT THE CURRENT war in Syria, Iran has remained a steadfast supporter of the Bashar al-Assad regime. The surprising endurance of the Iran-Syria alliance is made more striking by the fact that it is based on neither shared national interests nor religious values, but is rather a tactical-cum-strategic partnership between two authoritarian regimes. Mutual contempt for Saddam Hussein's Iraq brought Syria and Iran together in 1980, and mutual fear and loathing of the United States and Israel has helped sustain their alliance.<sup>1</sup>

Iran initially supported the popular uprisings in the Middle East—calling them "Islamic awakenings"—when it appeared that only Western-allied Arab autocracies in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen were vulnerable to collapse. In Syria, however, Tehran has offered unwavering support to the embattled al-Assad regime and denounced the Syrian opposition as "terrorists" supported by a motley alliance of Gulf Arab states, Israel, and the United States. Senior Iranian figures, such as former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, have referred to Syria as "a golden ring of resistance against Israel," and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei-confidante Mehdi Taeb said that Syria is Iran's "35<sup>th</sup> province... if we lose Syria we won't be able to hold Tehran."<sup>2</sup> Without Iranian military aid and financial largesse, al-Assad's regime may have fallen long ago.

This article examines the factors driving Iran's support for the al-Assad regime, including its concern over the alternatives. It argues that despite Iran's economic travails and the surprise election of "moderate" cleric Hassan Rouhani as Iran's new president, Tehran's political, financial

1 For an excellent account of the origins of the Iran-Syria alliance, see Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

2 These quotes are excerpted from the following study: Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute, May 2013.

and military support for the al-Assad regime is unlikely to waver.

### Strategic Interests at Stake in Syria

Syria has been Tehran's only consistent ally since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Whereas the rest of the Arab world supported, and in some cases bankrolled, Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, Hafiz al-Assad's Syria sided with Tehran. While Iranian and Syrian tactical interests have occasionally diverged during the last three decades, on macro-strategic issues the two regimes have more often worked in unison.

Beyond its political support, Syria is also critical to Iran in that it provides it a geographic thoroughfare to Lebanese Shi'a militia Hizb Allah, which is one of the crown jewels of the Iranian revolution. Both Syria and Hizb Allah are crucial elements of Iran's resistance alliance, and much of Hizb Allah's armaments are thought to emanate from Iran via the Damascus airport.<sup>3</sup>

Iranian motivations in keeping the al-Assad regime in power are also driven by deep concerns about the composition of a post-Assad government. Given Syria's overwhelming Sunni Arab demographic majority, Iran fears the prospect of Syria being rendered a Sunni sectarian regime aligned with Saudi Arabia or the United States and hostile to Shi'a Iran.<sup>4</sup> While visiting Damascus in August 2012, former Iranian Supreme National Security Adviser Saeed Jalili stated that "Iran will absolutely not allow the axis of resistance, of which it considers Syria to be a main pillar, to be broken in any way."<sup>5</sup> In other words, if the ends are opposing the United States and Israel, almost any means are justified.

### Iran's Level of Involvement in Syria

While Iran's major role in Syria is undeniable, it is impossible to discern Tehran's precise financial and military assistance to the al-Assad regime. According to official estimates, Iran's annual trade with Syria is only around

\$700 million per year, which is less than half of its trade with Afghanistan and a small fraction of its \$30 billion trade with China.<sup>6</sup> This figure, however, does not take into account the subsidized oil Iran has provided Syria since 1982, when Damascus agreed to close Iraq's oil pipeline through Syrian territory.<sup>7</sup>

Since the tumult began in Syria, Iranian financial largesse has been ever more critical. In January 2013, Syrian state media announced a \$1 billion "credit facility agreement" with Iran.<sup>8</sup> Five months later, Syrian officials announced that Iran would provide Damascus an additional \$3.6 billion line of credit "to finance the purchase of petrol and associated products."<sup>9</sup>

Iran has also offered Syria conventional and unconventional military aid and intelligence training and cooperation to help quell popular unrest. According to both U.S. government reports and Iranian official statements, Tehran has helped create a 50,000 strong Syrian paramilitary group known as Jaysh al-Shabi (The People's Army) to aid Syrian government forces.<sup>10</sup>

Similar to other Iranian strategic outposts in countries undergoing tumult—such as Iraq and Afghanistan—it is the elite wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), known as the Qods Force, that oversees Tehran's activities in Syria—not the Iranian Foreign Ministry. Defected former Syrian Prime Minister Riyad Hijab went so far as to say that "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but [Qods Force commander] Qasem Soleimani."<sup>11</sup> The U.S. Treasury department sanctioned

Soleimani and Operations and Training Commander Mohsen Chizari for their role in "the violent repression against the Syrian people."<sup>12</sup>

Iran has also allegedly dispatched IRGC ground forces to Syria with experience suppressing popular unrest in provincial areas within Iran, such as ethnic and tribal insurgencies.<sup>13</sup> Dozens of these forces were allegedly kidnapped by anti-Assad rebels in August 2012, only to be released later as part of a prisoner exchange.<sup>14</sup> While Tehran alleges that they were religious pilgrims, evidence suggests otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

Iran also reportedly helped Syria expand its chemical weapons arsenal.<sup>16</sup> Iranian support for Syria's chemical weapons programs has allegedly included the deployment of Iranian scientists, the supply of equipment and precursor chemicals, and technical training.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to financial and military support, during the last three decades Iran has made a concerted effort to forge cultural and religious bonds between the Iranian and Syrian populations by offering its citizens heavily subsidized flight and hotel packages to Syria.<sup>18</sup> Millions of Iranian religious tourists have visited the Sayyida Zaynab Shi'a shrine in Damascus.

12 "Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism," U.S. Treasury Department, February 16, 2012.

13 Fulton et al.

14 "Tensions Rise Over Iranian Hostages," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2012; Anne Barnard and Sebnem Arsu, "Iranian Captives Freed in Prisoner Exchange in Syria," *New York Times*, January 9, 2013.

15 "Everyone on this trip was either a Guard or a Basij militia. This wasn't a regular tour group," said an employee of the tour agency that organized the trip. See *ibid*.

16 James Ball, "Syria Has Expanded Chemical Weapons Supply With Iran's Help, Documents Show," *Washington Post*, July 27, 2012.

17 *Ibid*. For the most up-to-date and in-depth study on Iran's role in Syria, see Fulton et al.

18 Western media reports about Iran's state-sponsored tourism in Syria date back to 1984. See, for example, Ned Temko, "Iranian Tourists in Syria: A Sign of Political Coziness," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 24, 1984.

3 *Ibid*.

4 "If it weren't for Syria's active government," said former Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, "the country would become like Qatar or Kuwait. Iran is not prepared to lose this golden counterweight." See *ibid*.

5 "Iran: We're in 'Axis of Resistance' with Syria," CBS/AP, August 7, 2012.

6 Alex Vatanka, "Syria Drives a Wedge Between Turkey and Iran," Middle East Institute, May 16, 2012.

7 "Syria," U.S. Library of Congress Country Studies, April 1987.

8 "Syria and Iran Ink Credit Deals," al-Bawaba, January 17, 2013.

9 "Iran Grants Syria \$3.6 Billion Credit to Buy Oil Products," Reuters, July 31, 2013.

10 "Head of Ammar Strategic Base: Syria is Iran's 35th Province; If We Lose Syria We Cannot Keep Tehran," Iran Pulse, February 14, 2013; "Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime," U.S. Treasury Department, December 11, 2012.

11 Fulton et al.

### Challenges and Opportunities

Iran's greatest challenge is sustaining its large financial aid to Syria while simultaneously enduring draconian international sanctions—in place due to its nuclear ambitions—that have cut its oil exports by half.<sup>19</sup> One Arab official estimated that Tehran is spending as much as \$600 to \$700 million per month to keep al-Assad solvent.<sup>20</sup> Absent a nuclear deal that reduces economic sanctions and allows Iran to increase its production and export more oil, Tehran's financial support for Syria could be viewed with increasing scrutiny at home by a population chafing under external economic pressure and internal mismanagement.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from its financial burden, Iran's support for Syria has caused it great reputational harm in the predominantly Sunni Arab world. Whereas several years ago Shi'a, Persian Iran was able to transcend ethnic and sectarian divides by appealing to popular Arab outrage against the U.S.-led war in Iraq or the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, today Iran is increasingly perceived by Sunni Arabs as a nefarious, sectarian actor.<sup>22</sup> Lebanese Hizb Allah has suffered a similar fate due to its support of al-Assad.

If the al-Assad regime loses Damascus, Tehran will face a difficult strategic decision: whether to preserve a sphere of influence by supporting a predominantly Alawite militia representing only a small fraction of Syrian society, or to befriend the Sunni rebels poised to wield authority in Damascus. Contrary to conventional wisdom, what is most important for Iran is not the sectarian composition of Syria's future leaders, but a like-minded ideological worldview premised on resistance to the United States and Israel.<sup>23</sup> As Iranian Supreme Leader

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei once said, "We will support and help any nations, any groups fighting against the Zionist regime across the world."<sup>24</sup> Iran's Sunni allies Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are cases in point. Yet despite sharing common enemies with some Syrian rebels, it may prove impossible for Iran to befriend the same forces it helped attack during the past two years. Anti-Shi'a, anti-Persian sentiment is rife among Syria's rebels, and the attraction of future Iranian financial support is eclipsed by the deeper pockets of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

What is paramount for Tehran is that Syria remains an Iranian strategic "resistance" ally and a way-station to Hizb Allah in Lebanon. While Iran's ideal endstate—the *status quo ante*, which is al-Assad regaining control over all Syrian territory—appears outside the realm of possibilities, for Tehran the key questions are how long can al-Assad hold Damascus, how much Iranian support will it require, and what happens if he loses power? According to one assessment, Iran's supply routes to Hizb Allah via Syria could be maintained even if al-Assad only maintains control of Damascus, Homs, and the coast. If al-Assad falls, proxy groups might be able to protect supply lines if the opposition does not establish control over Syria's borders.<sup>25</sup>

### Implications of Rouhani's Election in Iran

While Iran's alliance with the al-Assad regime has endured for more than three decades, the biggest question in the coming months is whether the surprise election of "moderate" cleric Hassan Rouhani will alter Iran's strategy in Syria. More specifically, does Rouhani have the will, ability or interest in changing Iran's Syria policy? Publicly, Rouhani has expressed solidarity with the al-Assad regime, declaring in a recent meeting with visiting Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi that "the Islamic Republic of Iran aims to strengthen its relations with Syria and will stand by it in facing all challenges. The deep, strategic and historic relations between the people of Syria and Iran...will not

be shaken by any force in the world."<sup>26</sup> In private, however, a former senior Rouhani aide was far more equivocal about Tehran's continued support for al-Assad. The best way to resolve U.S.-Iranian tensions in Syria, he argued, is to find a "Syrian Karzai"—a Sunni Arab politician palatable to Tehran, Washington, and the Syrian people.<sup>27</sup>

While Rouhani's desire to alter Iran's approach to Syria is questionable, his ability to do so is even more uncertain. The officials who manage Iran's Syria policy—namely, current Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani—do not report to Rouhani, but answer to Ayatollah Khamenei. Given Syria's centrality to another indispensable resistance ally, Hizb Allah, one official Iranian source said that those who believe that Rouhani can alter Tehran's patronage of Hizb Allah are "either naïve or daydreamers...Whoever the president is, whoever the ministers are, Hizb Allah will still be the same Hizb Allah to Iran. Hizb Allah to Iran isn't a card to play with. Hizb Allah today is the crown jewel of the resistance bloc; presidential moderation doesn't mean giving up the nation's strengths."<sup>28</sup>

In this context, it appears highly unlikely that Iran will abandon its support for the al-Assad regime in the near future. For U.S. policymakers, Iran's unabashed support for al-Assad is a mixed blessing. Iranian support prolongs al-Assad's shelf-life and further tarnishes U.S.-Iran tension and mistrust, making a potential nuclear accommodation less likely. At the same time, it simultaneously darkens Iran's regional reputation among Sunnis and hemorrhages it financially, weakening its ability to project power and influence throughout the Middle East.

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19 "Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions," International Crisis Group, February 25, 2013.

20 Samia Nakhoul, "Hezbollah's Syria Victory Risks Wider Sunni-Shi'ite Conflict," Reuters, June 6, 2013.

21 Some Iranians protesting rising inflation in 2012 chanted slogans such as, "Forget about Syria, think about us." See Joby Warrick and James Ball, "Food Prices, Inflation Rise Sharply in Iran," *Washington Post*, October 4, 2012.

22 James Zogby, "The Rise and Fall of Iran in Arab and Muslim Public Opinion," *Huffington Post*, March 9, 2013.

23 For more on this argument, see Karim Sadjadpour and Firas Maksad, "Syria's Fate Hinges on Whom It

Hates Most, U.S. or Iran?" *Bloomberg*, February 5, 2013.

24 Thomas Erdbrink, "Khamenei: Iran Will Back 'Any Nations, Any Groups' Fighting Israel," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2012.

25 Fulton et al.

26 Bassem Mroue, "New Iranian President Vows Support for Assad," *Associated Press*, August 5, 2013.

27 Personal interview, former senior Rouhani aide, Washington, D.C., July 2013.

28 Ali Hashem, "Iran's Ties to Hezbollah Unchanged," *al-Monitor*, August 10, 2013.



## Hizb Allah's Gambit in Syria

By Matthew Levitt and Aaron Y. Zelin

SPEAKING IN LATE May 2013, Hizb Allah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah declared that the battle in Syria was Hizb Allah's fight: "We will continue along the road, bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices. This battle is ours, and I promise you victory."<sup>1</sup> To that end, Lebanese Hizb Allah went "all-in" fighting alongside Bashar al-Assad regime loyalists and Iranian revolutionary guardsmen against Syrian rebels. The impact of Hizb Allah's involvement has been significant, as was seen most clearly in the battle for Qusayr in May-June 2013, where Hizb Allah gunmen reportedly fought house to house, suffered losses, and played the decisive role in turning the tide against anti-Assad rebels who ultimately lost the town. That battle also laid bare the myth that Hizb Allah was not fighting in Syria.

This article identifies Hizb Allah's strategic calculus for joining the fight in Syria. First, it contextualizes Hizb Allah's historical connection to the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus since it is utilized heavily in Hizb Allah's propaganda. It then probes Hizb Allah's military involvement as well as its training advisory role with new militias. It finds that Hizb Allah is heavily involved in Syria not only to help its patrons in Damascus and Tehran, but also to stave off an existential crisis in Lebanon if the Syrian rebels were to achieve victory.

### Hizb Allah's Historical Ties to the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine

Although Hizb Allah has admitted to fighting in Syria, it initially insisted that it was only either defending ethnic Lebanese living on the Syrian side of the border, or protecting Shi'a shrines, specifically the Sayyida Zaynab in southern Damascus. These defensive narratives used by Hizb Allah and its allies in Iran and Iraq have dominated their propaganda in the past two years.<sup>2</sup>

While the Sayyida Zaynab shrine is indeed a major Shi'a pilgrimage site, Hizb Allah has more than just spiritual ties to the shrine. As early as the 1980s, Hizb Allah used the site as a place to identify potential militant recruits. For Saudi Shi'a recruits in particular, the Sayyida Zaynab shrine served as a transfer hub and a cover for travel between Saudi Arabia and training camps in Lebanon or Iran.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine's operational significance to Hizb Allah emerged in the context of the FBI investigation into the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing that killed 19 U.S. Air Force personnel and wounded another 372 Americans.<sup>4</sup> Five of the Khobar Towers conspirators were recruited in Damascus, according to the findings of U.S. investigators, most at the Sayyida Zaynab shrine. When Abdallah al-Jarash was recruited at the site, he was told that the goal of this "Saudi Hizb Allah" group was "to target foreign interests, American in particular, in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere."<sup>5</sup> Later, at least one of the operatives recruited at Sayyida Zaynab, Ali al-Marhoum, would return to Saudi Arabia to recruit more operatives.<sup>6</sup>

Just days before the bombing, several of the conspirators met in Damascus at the Sayyida Zaynab shrine to confer one last time with senior leadership of Saudi Hizb Allah.<sup>7</sup> Abdel Karim al-Nasser, the group's chief, reportedly went over the operational details of the bomb plot with the men to be sure everyone knew their roles.<sup>8</sup>

### Hizb Allah Joins the Fray

When did Hizb Allah join the fight in Syria? Hizb Allah, Nasrallah insisted in May 2013, had not intervened in the fighting in Syria until just several months earlier. While "tens of thousands of [Sunni] fighters" joined

the fight in Syria, Nasrallah lamented, the international community only complained about foreign intervention in Syria when "a small group from Hizb Allah entered Syria."<sup>9</sup>

Yet Hizb Allah's destabilizing activities in Syria date almost to the beginning of the country's uprising in 2011. These activities, as a journalist in Lebanon wrote, have "torn away the party's mask of virtue."<sup>10</sup> Within weeks of the uprising, Nasrallah himself called on all Syrians to stand by the al-Assad regime.<sup>11</sup> As reports emerged in May 2011 that Iran's Qods Force was helping the Syrian regime crack down on antigovernment demonstrators, Hizb Allah denied playing "any military role in Arab countries."<sup>12</sup> By the following month, however, Syrian protesters were heard chanting not only for al-Assad's downfall, but also against Iran and Hizb Allah.<sup>13</sup> Video footage showed protesters burning posters of Nasrallah.<sup>14</sup> According to a senior Syrian defense official who defected from the regime, Syrian security services were unable to handle the uprising on their own. "They didn't have decent snipers or equipment," he explained. "They needed qualified snipers from Hizb Allah and Iran."<sup>15</sup>

Over time, Hizb Allah increasingly struggled to conceal its on-the-ground support for the al-Assad regime. In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted Hizb Allah, already on the department's terrorism list, for providing support to the al-Assad regime.<sup>16</sup> Since the beginning of the rebellion, the U.S. Treasury

9 Nasrallah, "Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation."

10 Michael Young, "Syria Widens Hezbollah's Contradictions," al-Arabiya, October 4, 2012.

11 "Hezbollah Chief Calls on Syrians to Stand by Assad Regime," *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2011.

12 Joby Warrick, "Iran Reportedly Aiding Syrian Crackdown," *Washington Post*, May 27, 2011; Thomas El-Basha, "Nasrallah Blasts Obama, Urges Arabs Withdraw Peace Initiative," *Daily Star* [Beirut], May 25, 2011.

13 "Syrian Protestors Turn on Iran and Hezbollah," *France 24*, June 3, 2011.

14 Ibid.

15 Nate Wright and James Hidler, "Syrian Regime 'Importing Snipers' for Protests," *Australian*, January 26, 2012.

16 "Treasury Designates Hizballah Leadership," U.S. Treasury Department, September 13, 2012.

1 Hassan Nasrallah, "Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation," al-Manar, May 25, 2013.

2 Phillip Smyth, "Hezbollah's Fallen Soldiers," *Foreign*

*Policy*, May 22, 2013.

3 Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group," *Middle East Journal* 64:2 (2010): pp. 179-197.

4 *The Khobar Towers Bombing Incident* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. House National Security Committee, 1996).

5 *U.S.A. v. Ahmed Mughassil et al.*, Eastern District of Virginia, 2001.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

Department contended, Hizb Allah had been providing “training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria’s increasingly ruthless efforts” against the opposition.<sup>17</sup> Most funerals for Hizb Allah members killed in the fighting were quiet affairs, as Hizb Allah tried to conceal the extent of its activities in Syria; however, news of its involvement began to emerge. In August 2012, Hizb Allah parliamentarians reportedly attended the funeral of military commander Musa Ali Shehimi who “died while performing his jihadi duty.”<sup>18</sup> A few weeks later, another Hizb Allah military commander, Ali Hussein Nassif, was killed in Syria, along with two bodyguards, also “while performing his jihadi duties,” according to a Hizb Allah newspaper.<sup>19</sup>

Hizb Allah’s “resistance” rhetoric notwithstanding, U.S. officials informed the UN Security Council in October 2012 that “the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah’s fighters are now part of Assad’s killing machine.”<sup>20</sup> Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hizb Allah members were fighting on behalf of the al-Assad government.<sup>21</sup> Amid increasing concern that the struggle in Syria would engulf the region in conflict, Hizb Allah established training camps near Syrian chemical weapons depots in November 2012.<sup>22</sup> According to a senior U.S. official, “The fear these weapons could fall into the wrong hands is our greatest concern.”<sup>23</sup>

#### Hizb Allah’s Strategic Interests in Syria

Hizb Allah has multiple identities, with several and sometimes competing goals and interests. It is one of the dominant political parties in Lebanon, as well as a social and religious

movement catering first and foremost—though not exclusively—to Lebanon’s Shi’a community. Hizb Allah is also Lebanon’s largest militia, the only Lebanese militia to keep its weapons and rebrand its armed elements as an “Islamic resistance” in response to the terms of the 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the Lebanese Civil War.

While the group’s various elements are intended to complement one another, the reality is often messier. In part, this is due to the compartmentalization of Hizb Allah’s covert activities. It is also, however, a result of the group’s multiple identities—Lebanese, pan-Shi’a, pro-Iranian—and the group’s various strategic interests tied to these different identities. Nowhere has this been starker than in Syria, where the group has turned the weapons it has long maintained were solely intended for “resistance” against Israel toward fellow Muslims to the east. Moreover, by engaging in sectarian violence in Syria, Hizb Allah threatens the stability of the fractured and deeply divided sectarian society in Lebanon. Ignoring the Lebanese government’s stated policy of non-intervention in Syria, Hizb Allah has dragged Lebanon into a sectarian war. Recognizing this, Nasrallah even suggested Lebanese could fight each other in Syria, just not in Lebanon:

We renew our call for sparing Lebanon any internal clash or conflict. We disagree over Syria. You fight in Syria; we fight in Syria; then let’s fight there. Do you want me to be more frank? Keep Lebanon aside. Why should we fight in Lebanon? There are different viewpoints, different visions, and different evaluation of obligations. Well so far so good. However, let’s spare Lebanon fighting, struggle and bloody confrontations.<sup>24</sup>

Yet Hizb Allah’s fight has not limited itself to the Syrian side of the border. Nor will Hizb Allah withdraw from its support of the al-Assad regime. Hizb Allah sees at stake a number of interlocking strategic interests so critical to the group that Nasrallah is willing to risk further undermining

Hizb Allah’s standing in Lebanon and the region.

Syria has been Hizb Allah’s reliable patron for years, a relationship that only grew deeper under the rule of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>25</sup> While Hafiz al-Assad used Hizb Allah as a proxy, he also kept the group at arm’s length and at times employed force to keep it in line. In 1988, for example, Hafiz al-Assad’s Syria issued a warrant for the arrest of Imad Mughniyyeh, the head of Hizb Allah’s Islamic Jihad Organization.<sup>26</sup> By 2010, however, Bashar al-Assad was not just allowing the transshipment of Iranian arms to Hizb Allah through Syria, but was reportedly providing Hizb Allah long-range Scud rockets from its own arsenal.<sup>27</sup> Nasrallah explained the nature of Hizb Allah’s alliance with Syria:

I frankly say that Syria is the backbone of the resistance, and the support of the resistance. The resistance cannot sit with hands crossed while its backbone is held vulnerable and its support is being broken or else we will be stupid. Stupid is he who stands motionless while watching death, the siege and conspiracy crawling towards him. He would be stupid then. However, the responsible, rational man acts with absolute responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

Hizb Allah’s support of the al-Assad regime is not due to a romantic sense of obligation. Hizb Allah is keen to make sure that air and land corridors remain open for the delivery of weapons, cash and other materials from Tehran. Until the Syrian civil war, Iranian aircraft would fly into Damascus International Airport where their cargo would be loaded onto Syrian military trucks and escorted into Lebanon for delivery to Hizb Allah.<sup>29</sup> Now, Hizb Allah is

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Babak Dehganpisheh, “Hezbollah Increases Support for Syrian Regime, U.S. and Lebanese Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth A. Kennedy, “Official: Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Syria,” *Daily Star*, October 2, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Edith M. Lederer, “US Says Hezbollah Is Part of Assad’s War Machine,” Associated Press, October 15, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syria Arab Republic Established Pursuant to United Nations Human Rights Council Resolutions S-17/1, 19/22 and 21/26,” UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 20, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> David Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Says 75,000 Troops Might Be Needed to Seize Syria Chemical Arms,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Nasrallah, “Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation.”

<sup>25</sup> Ze’ev Schiff, “Don’t Underestimate Assad Jr.,” *Haaretz*, August 2, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb’Allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 71, 85-86.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Lavie, “Israeli Officials: Syria Gave Hezbollah Scuds,” Associated Press, April 14, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Nasrallah, “Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation.”

<sup>29</sup> Yossi Melman and Sof Hashavua, “In Depth: How Iranian Weapons Go Through Syria to Hezbollah,” *Je-*

desperate to either secure the al-Assad regime, its control of the airport and the roads to Lebanon or, at a minimum, establish firm Alawite control of the coastal areas so that Hizb Allah can receive shipments through the air and seaports in Latakia, Syria. Over the past few years, FBI investigations into Hizb Allah's criminal enterprises in the United States and Europe revealed at least two cases where Hizb Allah operatives planned to procure weapons—in one instance, man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs) intended to take down Israeli aircraft—and ship them to Hizb Allah through Latakia.<sup>30</sup> In one of the cases, the European Hizb Allah procurement operative told an FBI undercover agent that the weapons would be exported to Latakia, where Hizb Allah controlled the port.<sup>31</sup> Secrecy would be guaranteed there, he assured the undercover agent, because Hizb Allah could shut down all of the security cameras when the shipment arrived and no shipping paperwork would be required once the items reached Syria.<sup>32</sup>

Hizb Allah is also fighting for the al-Assad regime in support of Iran's interests. Hizb Allah's ideological commitment to Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which holds that a Shi'a Islamic cleric should serve as the supreme head of government, is a key source of tension since it means that the group is simultaneously committed to the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, its sectarian Shi'a community within Lebanon, and fellow Shi'a abroad.

The consequences of these competing ideological drivers were clear in July 2006, when Hizb Allah dragged Israel and Lebanon into a war by crossing

the UN-demarcated border between the two countries, killing three Israeli soldiers, and kidnapping two more in an ambush.<sup>33</sup> These consequences came to the fore again two years later when Hizb Allah took over West Beirut by force of arms, turning its weapons of "resistance" against fellow Lebanese citizens.<sup>34</sup> They are now more present than ever as Hizb Allah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) work together to shore up the al-Assad regime.

Finally, in the event that—after some 100,000<sup>35</sup> reported deaths in the civil war—Iran, Hizb Allah and Syria are unable to definitively defeat the rebels and pacify the country's Sunni majority, Hizb Allah is already establishing local proxies (as it did in Iraq just a few years earlier) through which it can maintain influence and conduct operations to undermine stability in the country in the future.<sup>36</sup>

#### Building Proxies

Helping establish, train, and equip militias in Syria is not new for Hizb Allah. It also took part in these activities last decade during the Iraq war in coordination with the IRGC.<sup>37</sup> Hizb Allah is now employing two of these Iraqi militias—Kataib Hizb Allah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq—to build up auxiliary forces to assist the al-Assad regime.<sup>38</sup> The key militias that Hizb Allah has assisted in Syria include Jaysh al-Shabi, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (the al-Abbas

Brigade), Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Liwa Zulfikar, and Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir.<sup>39</sup>

Jaysh al-Shabi (The People's Army) is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and militia force that maintains a connection to the al-Assad regime's military apparatus.<sup>40</sup> This highlights how the regime has adapted its forces to fight an asymmetric and irregular war. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Jaysh al-Shabi "was created, and continues to be maintained, with support from Iran and Hizballah and is modeled after the Iranian Basij militia."<sup>41</sup>

In contrast to Jaysh al-Shabi, the other militias are not within Syria's security apparatus, but are new independent proxies allegedly established with the assistance of the IRGC and Hizb Allah.<sup>42</sup> Most of these groups use the same type of iconography and narratives that Hizb Allah has put forward as it relates to the "resistance," its "jihadist duties," and protecting Shi'a shrines. Of these four militias, the al-Abbas Brigade is the most prominent and has been involved in the conflict since the fall of 2012. The al-Abbas Brigade's fighters are a combination of members of Lebanese Hizb Allah, Kataib Hizb Allah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.<sup>43</sup> It operates mainly in southern Damascus.<sup>44</sup>

Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Liwa Zulfikar have spawned from the al-Abbas Brigade and have been key additions to assisting the fight in southern Damascus.<sup>45</sup> Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Liwa Zulfikar both draw fighters from Lebanese Hizb

*rusalem Post*, May 25, 2013; Phil Alito, "Iran-Lebanese Hezbollah Relationship in 2008," American Enterprise Institute, March 1, 2009.

30 Personal interview, U.S. law enforcement officials, Philadelphia, PA, March 11, 2010; "Arrests Made in Case Involving Conspiracy to Procure Weapons, Including Anti-Aircraft Missiles," U.S. Department of Justice, November 23, 2009; *U.S.A. v. Dani Nemr Tarraf et al.*, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2009; "Alleged Arms Dealer for Hezbollah Charged," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 24, 2009.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Greg Myre and Steven Erlanger, "Israelis Enter Lebanon After Attacks," *New York Times*, July 13, 2006.

34 Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, "Hezbollah Seizes Control in West Beirut," *New York Times*, May 9, 2008.

35 Albert Aji and Edith M. Lederer, "U.N.: More Than 100,000 Now Dead in Syria's Civil War," Associated Press, July 25, 2013.

36 Phillip Smyth, "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

37 Michael R. Gordon and Dexter Filkins, "Hezbollah Said to Help Shiite Army in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 28, 2006; Michael R. Gordon, "Hezbollah Trains Iraqis in Iran, Officials Say," *New York Times*, May 5, 2008; Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Iraq Frees Hezbollah Commander who Helped Mold Shia Terror Groups," *The Long War Journal*, November 16, 2012.

38 For more on these two Iraqi Shi'a militias, see "Kata'ib Hizballah," The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, March 5, 2010; Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," Institute for the Study of War, December 2012.

39 See Phillip Smyth's work at [www.jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade](http://www.jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade).

40 "Treasury Sanctions al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime," U.S. Treasury Department, December 11, 2012.

41 Ibid.

42 Smyth, "Hezbollah's Fallen Soldiers."

43 Phillip Smyth, "What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA)?: Assessing Syria's Shia 'International Brigade' Through Their Social Media Presence," *Jihadology.net*, May 15, 2013.

44 Ibid.

45 Phillip Smyth, "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada: Another Supplier of Iraqi Shia Fighters in Syria," *Jihadology.net*, June 3, 2013; Phillip Smyth, "Liwa'a Zulfikar: Birth of A New Shia Militia in Syria?" *Jihadology.net*, June 20, 2013.



Allah and Iraqi Shi'a.<sup>46</sup> Liwa Zulfiqar is also believed to gain some fighters from Moqtada al-Sadr's Liwa al-Yum al-Mawud.<sup>47</sup> Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada was established in mid-April 2013, while Liwa Zulfiqar was established in early June 2013.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the al-Abbass Brigade, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada or Liwa Zulfiqar, Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir does not operate in southern Damascus around the area where Sayyida Zaynab is located. Instead, Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir mainly operates in rural Aleppo, even farther north than Lebanese Hizb Allah's operations in Qusayr and Homs.<sup>49</sup> Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir first began operating in May 2013 and has been involved in some fighting. According to their own videos or Facebook messages, 10 of their fighters have been killed so far in Syria.<sup>50</sup>

Although Lebanese Hizb Allah and the IRGC have helped to build up these auxiliary forces, Lebanese Hizb Allah itself has also engaged in fighting against Syrian rebel forces.

#### Hizb Allah's Spring Offensive

A more public presence in the fight against Syrian rebels came in the spring of 2013 when martyrdom notices for Hizb Allah began to appear on their official and unofficial websites, forums, and Facebook pages.<sup>51</sup> Based on Hizb Allah's organizational structure and disciplined messaging, it is likely that these notices were sanctioned by the leadership even though the group did not publicly admit to involvement until

May 2013. Determining the number of fighters Hizb Allah has sent to Syria is difficult to ascertain, but according to French intelligence sources some 3,000-4,000 individuals have made the trip to assist the al-Assad regime.<sup>52</sup>

Hizb Allah's fighters have proven valuable to the Syrian regime. Within a few weeks of Nasrallah's public proclamation that Hizb Allah had entered the conflict, Hizb Allah delivered the strategic city of Qusayr to the regime and wrested control from the rebels. Highlighting the nature of the battle, Hizb Allah lost at least 60 men.<sup>53</sup> While there may have been a costly price, it vindicated Nasrallah's words a few weeks prior: "I say to all the honorable people, to the mujahidin, to the heroes: I have always promised you a victory and now I pledge to you a new one in Syria."<sup>54</sup> As a result, this feat was then sold on the Shi'a street in Lebanon as being just as important as the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and its "victory" over Israel in the summer of 2006.<sup>55</sup>

Since then, Hizb Allah has moved from securing Qusayr to attempting to retake all of Homs for the regime and helping in a counteroffensive in Latakia.<sup>56</sup> There have also been rumors—although no evidence—that Hizb Allah has sent men to Aleppo to help with that battle as well.<sup>57</sup> Since the overall war in Syria appears to be in a stalemate, and Hizb Allah is fully supporting the Syrian regime and their patron in Iran, it is likely that more Hizb Allah operatives will continue to become involved over time.

#### Conclusion

For a group that has always portrayed itself as the vanguard standing up for the dispossessed, and has consistently downplayed its sectarian and pro-Iranian identities, supporting an Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition risked shattering a long-cultivated image. In the end, the strategic necessity of preventing the collapse of the al-Assad regime—which, if replaced by a regime representing the country's Sunni majority would, at the least, be far less friendly to Hizb Allah and possibly oppose it outright—took precedence over the need to maintain the party's image.

Whether al-Assad maintains or loses power will have a different set of consequences for Hizb Allah. If al-Assad succeeds, Hizb Allah is unlikely to enjoy the sympathy of the majority Sunni Arab world; it will be isolated and more reliant than before on Iran and the al-Assad regime. Hizb Allah will face delicate sectarian issues and consequences at home in Lebanon as the Sunni population is not likely to accept an emboldened Hizb Allah. On the other hand, if Hizb Allah fails and the Syrian regime falls, they will still be despised by the majority of the Sunni Arab world but will also lose a strategic ally and route for obtaining weapons from Iran. It is also possible that in such a desperate scenario, they could rely more on terrorist attacks due to a loss of power and prestige. Regardless, the war in Syria has exposed Hizb Allah's true strategic interests.

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46 Ibid.

47 "Tashkil 'Liwa' Zulfiqar' thani milisha li-hamayya maqam al-Sayyida Zaynab," *al-Hayat*, June 8, 2013.

48 Smyth, "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada: Another Supplier of Iraqi Shia Fighters in Syria"; Smyth, "Liwa'a Zulfiqar: Birth of A New Shia Militia in Syria?"

49 Phillip Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria," *Jihadology.net*, July 20, 2013.

50 Substantiation of these can only be confirmed via their own videos (without other documents to solidly identify it) and Facebook statuses unlike the other groups where other sources have been able to independently confirm the content. Therefore, for now, one should be cautious when analyzing this particular data point. See Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria."

51 While efforts to publicize these death notices only occurred in the spring of 2013, there were other signs that Hizb Allah was already fighting in Syria. This was based on funerals publicized in the press as noted earlier in the following article: Smyth, "Hezbollah's Fallen Soldiers."

52 Jana El Hassan, "4,000 Hezbollah Fighters Reach Rebel-Held Aleppo: FSA," *Daily Star*, June 4, 2013.

53 Gili Cohen, "Thousands of Hezbollah Troops Fighting, Hundreds Killed in Syria, Study Confirms," *Haaretz*, June 5, 2013.

54 Nasrallah, "Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation."

55 Phillip Smyth, "'Divine Victory' in Qusayr: Hizballah Promotes Their Success on the Web," *Jihadology.net*, June 16, 2013.

56 "Reports: Syrian Troops, Hezbollah Consolidate Gains in Homs," *Voice of America*, July 28, 2013; "More Than 10,000 Hezbollah Members Fighting in Syria, Source Says," *Agence France-Presse*, August 25, 2013.

57 Instead, it could be sending members of Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir to Aleppo. See Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria."

## The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance

By Nicholas Blanford

THE 17-DAY ASSAULT spearheaded by Lebanon's Shi'a militia Hizb Allah against the Syrian town of Qusayr set a number of precedents both for Syria's civil war and for Hizb Allah. The return of Qusayr to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in June 2013—after being held in rebel hands for more than a year—marked the beginning of a broader campaign by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) to restore control over key strategic areas that had fallen to rebel hands. The loss of Qusayr was a significant blow to the armed opposition, perhaps more in terms of morale and perception than strategic value, a sentiment reinforced by subsequent regime gains on the ground, continued hesitation by the international community to provide weapons to rebel forces and signs of growing animosity among rebel factions.<sup>1</sup> The battle also marked the first time that Hizb Allah played a significant lead combat role in the Syria war, even though its fighters operated in Syria for at least a year prior to the Qusayr offensive. Furthermore, it was Hizb Allah's first experience in launching a major offensive operation in an urban environment. Hizb Allah suffered a relatively high number of casualties during the battle, yet the casualty toll and blowback in Lebanon—politically and in terms of security—has not deterred the organization from deploying to other combat theaters in Syria in support of the SAA, underlining its commitment to the trilateral "axis of resistance" with the al-Assad regime and Iran.

This article examines how Hizb Allah and the SAA waged offensive operations in Qusayr, how the anti-Assad rebels sought to defend the town against the assault, and if Hizb Allah's success in Qusayr will embolden it to escalate militancy elsewhere in Syria. It finds that although Hizb Allah eventually ousted the rebel forces and reclaimed the town with the assistance of air

and artillery support from the SAA, the organization lacks the capacity to replicate its Qusayr tactics on a more frequent basis and in larger urban environments across Syria. Since the conclusion of the Qusayr campaign, Hizb Allah has reverted to its previous duty of combat support to regular SAA units in other villages. Nevertheless, that does not preclude Hizb Allah from pursuing similar Qusayr-style operations if the circumstances match the organization's capabilities.

### The Pre-Assault Campaign

Qusayr, a town of approximately 30,000 mainly Sunni residents,<sup>2</sup> lies five miles north of Lebanon's northern border and 16 miles southwest of Homs, Syria's third largest city. The terrain around Qusayr is a flat arable landscape of orchards and fields well irrigated by the Assi River.<sup>3</sup> The population of the Qusayr area is a tangled mix of confessions including Sunni, Shi'a, Alawite and Christian.<sup>4</sup> Around four miles west of Qusayr is a belt of small villages, hamlets and farms populated by Lebanese Shi'a. Border controls in this area are traditionally lax, which allow Lebanese and Syrians to move at will across the frontier.<sup>5</sup>

Qusayr's importance lays in the fact that it served as a logistical conduit for the anti-Assad revolt facilitating the movement of weapons and militants between Lebanon and Homs. Lebanon's northeast Bekaa Valley is home to a Sunni population, most of which sympathizes with the Syrian opposition. Syrian rebels and Lebanese volunteers infiltrated Syria from Lebanon via the flat arable Masharei al-Qaa district and the adjacent arid mountains to the

east.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the highway linking Damascus to the Mediterranean coastal port town of Tartus runs between Homs and Qusayr. Rebel control of Qusayr and parts of Homs threatened regime traffic.

The SAA put Qusayr under siege in November 2011, and three months later heavy fighting erupted as Syrian rebels and the SAA fought for control of the town. By July 2012, Qusayr was in rebel hands and sporadic clashes broke out in villages to the west, roughly along a line separating Shi'a- and Sunni-populated villages.

According to Lebanese Shi'a residents of the villages inside Syria, the rebels were attempting to drive them out of their homes to establish a rebel (effectively a Sunni) belt of territory across the top of northeast Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> They also accused the rebels—whom they described as Salafi-jihadis—of killing civilians, looting homes and destroying crops in Shi'a areas.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, anti-Assad rebels accused Hizb Allah of fighting in territory west and south of Qusayr. On October 2, 2012, Ali Nassif, a top Hizb Allah commander, was killed near Qusayr,<sup>9</sup> an incident that hardened the growing suspicion in Lebanon at the time that the militant group was operating in Syria alongside the SAA.<sup>10</sup> The rebels described the Hizb Allah combatants as "professional" and "tough" and "none of them were under 35-years-old."<sup>11</sup>

In mid-April 2013, the SAA and Hizb Allah launched a more determined campaign to seize the villages around Qusayr as a prelude to an assault on the town itself. SAA and Hizb Allah forces achieved initial success with the

6 Personal interviews, Syrian rebel fighters, Jdeideh, Aarsal, Masharei al-Qaa, Lebanon, May 2012-May 2013.

7 Personal interviews, Shi'a residents from Safafah village in Syria and Hawsh Beit Ali and Qasr villages in Lebanon, Qasr and Hawsh Beit Ali, Lebanon, October 16, 2012.

8 Ibid.

9 "Hezbollah Military Commander 'Killed in Syria,'" BBC, October 2, 2012.

10 Hizb Allah only fully admitted it was active in Syria in May 2013 after the battle for Qusayr had begun.

11 Personal interviews, rebels belonging to the Jusiyah Martyrs Brigade (a unit in the Farouq Battalions), Masharei al-Qaa, Lebanon, October 8-9, 2012. See also Nicholas Blanford, "Accusations Mount of Hezbollah Fighting in Syria," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 15, 2012.

1 Mariam Karouny and Oliver Holmes, "New Front Opens in Syria as Rebels say al-Qaeda Attack Means War," Reuters, July 12, 2013.

2 "General Consensus of Population and Housing 2004,"

Syria Central Bureau of Statistics, Homs Governorate, undated; Hwaida Saad and Kareem Fahim, "Syrian Forces Chase Rebels Who Fled Fallen Town," *New York Times*, June 6, 2013. Some reports place the population at 40,000. See "A Look at the Fighting in Syria's Town of Qusayr," Associated Press, June 3, 2013.

3 Rameh Hamieh, "Assi River Basin: Lebanese Farmers Struggle for Survival in Syria," *al-Akbar*, October 27, 2012; Radwan Mortada, "Syria: Turning Point in the Battle of Qusayr," *al-Akbar*, May 20, 2013; Nasser Sharara, "Hezbollah Defends Shiite Villages in Syria War," *al-Monitor*, February 20, 2013.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

seizure of Tel Nabi Mindo, four and a half miles northwest of Qusayr.<sup>12</sup> The small hill in Tel Nabi Mindo afforded the SAA and Hizb Allah an overview of the surrounding flat terrain.

Reports of the ebb and flow of fighting in the following weeks were often confused and contradictory. Nevertheless, the SAA and Hizb Allah slowly gained ground, capturing villages to the west and southwest of Qusayr. Hizb Allah's role in the fighting triggered several rocket barrages into the Shi'a-populated Hermel district of Lebanon's northern Bekaa. On April 14, rockets struck Hawsh Sayyed Ali, Sahlat al-My, Qwak and Qasr in Lebanon, killing two people.<sup>13</sup> More rockets hit the same area on April 21 and April 23.<sup>14</sup> As the SAA and Hizb Allah pushed the rebels back toward Qusayr, the Lebanese Shi'a-populated areas of the northern Bekaa fell beyond the range of the 107mm, 122mm and homemade rockets fired by the anti-Assad rebels from the northeast.<sup>15</sup> The Hermel area, however, was subject to several more rocket salvos fired from a mountainous area in Syria due east.<sup>16</sup>

By mid-May 2013, the SAA and Hizb Allah had taken control of most of the terrain surrounding Qusayr except for a corridor running north that included the disused Dabaa military airbase, which lay in rebel hands.

### Assault Preparations

Qusayr's defenders were drawn from a broad array of rebel units, many of them local village- or town-based entities that were part of the Farouq Battalions, the largest single faction operating in Qusayr.<sup>17</sup> The Farouq Battalions are one of the largest rebel units in Syria and are a core component of the Syria Islamic Liberation Front, a coalition of rebel factions.<sup>18</sup> They emerged in Homs as a sub-unit of the Khaled bin Walid Brigades but have since expanded across Syria.<sup>19</sup>

The number of rebel units and fighters who fought in Qusayr is unclear. Estimates placed the number of units at around 15, and the total number of fighters was probably less than a few thousand.<sup>20</sup> One estimate given to the author by rebel fighters from Qusayr was between 11,000 and 12,000, figures that appear exaggerated.<sup>21</sup> Another figure cited by a rebel fighter of 2,000 combatants is likely more accurate.<sup>22</sup> The Qusayr Military Council, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Mohieddin al-Zain (also known as Abu Arab), grouped all factions in Qusayr under a single command. The chain of command appeared confused as rebel militants who fought in the battle later gave different names when asked to identify the overall commander of rebel forces in Qusayr.<sup>23</sup> There were reports that members of the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra

operated in Qusayr, although these reports could not be confirmed.<sup>24</sup> Rebel fighters claimed there were no Jabhat al-Nusra personnel in the town.

The rebels appeared to have been reasonably well-equipped in terms of weapons and ammunition at the beginning of the battle for Qusayr. Their arms stockpile was augmented by the capture of the Dabaa airbase and the seizure of SAA weapons and ammunition.<sup>25</sup> The fighters were armed with an assortment of rifles, the most common being AK-47 variants, RPG-7s, PKC light machine guns, twin-barreled 23mm anti-aircraft guns, a variety of mortars and small caliber artillery rockets (107mm and 122mm).<sup>26</sup>

Rebel fighters undertook extensive defensive preparations in the knowledge that the town would be assaulted by government forces at some point. The town was split into sectors and different units were assigned to their defense.<sup>27</sup> Rebels excavated tunnels and underground bunkers, erected earth barricades across streets, booby-trapped buildings and mined roads.<sup>28</sup> They made homemade explosives that they turned into "belly charge" mines—consisting of dozens of pounds of explosives buried beneath streets and detonated by a command wire—to destroy the SAA's armored vehicles.

Hizb Allah's battle plans included splitting the town into 16 operational sectors and assigning code numbers to different objectives and locations.<sup>29</sup> Designating code numbers is standard Hizb Allah practice in which fighters adopt a verbal code system for use over unencrypted radio communications.<sup>30</sup> Hizb Allah was given tactical control of the battle even to the extent of issuing

12 Tel Nabi Mindo is the site of Kadesh where one of history's earliest battles with detailed records took place in 1274 BC pitting the Egyptian empire under Ramesses II against the Hittite empire under Muwatalli II.

13 "2 More Rockets Land in Hermel Town as Lebanon Asks for Arab League Assistance," Naharnet, April 15, 2013.

14 Rakan al-Fakih, "Syrian Rebels Step Up Rocket Attacks, Two Hit Hermel," *Daily Star* [Beirut], April 22, 2013; "Two Grad Rockets From Syria Land on Outskirts of Hermel," Naharnet, April 23, 2013.

15 Numerous videos were posted online showing rebels launching rockets toward Lebanon. For two examples, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhHMiQz7Ew](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhHMiQz7Ew) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXz6do74uO4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXz6do74uO4).

16 The Liwa al-Tawhid fired six 122mm Katyusha rockets into the Hermel area on May 28, wounding three people. Judging from a video, the rebel unit was located approximately 12-14 miles due east of Hermel, the outer limit of the 122mm rocket's range. See [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=8BtntpMm-gGo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=8BtntpMm-gGo).

17 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Arsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

18 For details on the Farouq Battalions and the Syria Islamic Liberation Front, see Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).

19 Ibid. Also see Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," Institute for the Study of War, June 2012.

20 Abdul Jabbar Mohammed Aqidi, head of the Aleppo Military Council, said there were 17 units in Qusayr. See "Interview with Abdul-Jabbar Aqidi," June 14, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=On8NWQcXm8#at=162](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=On8NWQcXm8#at=162). Another article cited the names of 15 rebel units. For details, see Alex Rowell, "Qusayr Resisting All-out Attack," *Now Lebanon*, May 20, 2013. Various reports placed the number of fighters in the low thousands. See Mariam Karouny, "Syrian Rebels Lose Strategic Town in Boost for Assad," Reuters, June 5, 2013.

21 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Arsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

22 Personal interview, rebel fighter, northern Lebanon, May 20, 2013.

23 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Arsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

24 Radwan Mortada, "Syria: Opposition's Booby Trap Blueprint for Qusayr," *al-Akhbar*, May 23, 2013.

25 Personal interview, rebel fighter, north Lebanon, May 20, 2013.

26 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Arsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Mona Alami, "Hezbollah Fighter Details Ops in Qusayr," *Now Lebanon*, June 4, 2013; personal interview, Hizb Allah combatants, Beirut, June 5, 2013.

30 For example, see Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 342.



orders to Syrian officers.<sup>31</sup> Hizb Allah's strength was placed at between 1,200 and 1,700 fighters, most of them older combat veterans and members of the party's special forces units.<sup>32</sup> One report said that Hizb Allah split its forces into 17 units of 100 men each.<sup>33</sup> During combat operations, however, the units broke down into typical fighting squads of three to five men each.<sup>34</sup>

Initially, each fighter served a seven-day tour on the frontline, but as the battle dragged on the duration was extended to 20 days.<sup>35</sup> Careful reconnaissance was conducted prior to the assault and Hizb Allah's combat engineers cleared booby traps from buildings.<sup>36</sup>

### The Assault

The attack began on May 19, 2013, with a heavy artillery bombardment and airstrikes against Qusayr in the early hours followed by advances of Hizb Allah fighters from the south, east and west backed by SAA troops.<sup>37</sup> The attacking forces made quick gains in the southern end of the town, reaching the town hall. One Syrian opposition activist said that by the end of the first day, SAA and Hizb Allah forces had seized some 60% of the town.<sup>38</sup>

Hizb Allah was expecting a swift victory in Qusayr, but despite the gains of the first hours, the battle grew more protracted as the rebels put up a spirited defense and Hizb Allah suffered unexpectedly high casualties. On May 19, the first day of the offensive, up to two dozen Hizb Allah fighters were reportedly killed in a rebel ambush.<sup>39</sup> The SAA and Hizb Allah slowed the pace

of assault, becoming more methodical and ensuring control of each objective before advancing further.<sup>40</sup> One Hizb Allah fighter said they were not fighting meter by meter, but "centimeter by centimeter."<sup>41</sup> The rebel mortar fire was a serious problem for the attacking force.<sup>42</sup> The small Hizb Allah fighting units pressed ahead to draw as close to the rebel lines as possible in the hope that the rebel mortar fire would cease out of the rebels' concern that they would hit their own side. Despite Hizb Allah's engineering teams working to dismantle booby traps and improvised explosive devices (IED), the Hizb Allah fighters avoided doorways and windows and instead blasted holes in the walls of buildings to move around.<sup>43</sup> Some of the IEDs used by the rebels bore similarities to those that Hizb Allah had taught the Palestinian Hamas Movement to build.

The rebel defenders acknowledged the fighting prowess of their Hizb Allah enemies. "They were very fierce fighters," said one rebel fighter from Qusayr. "You would shoot at them but they kept on coming. They wore headbands with 'O Husayn' written on them."<sup>44</sup> The rebels noted how the Hizb Allah fighters were constantly trying to advance, even under heavy fire, and outflank their positions.<sup>45</sup>

Hizb Allah's combat units were supported by the SAA's air and artillery power, and the Lebanese group employed RPG-7s and snipers equipped with Dragunov 7.62mm rifles for close quarters combat.<sup>46</sup> Yet Hizb Allah also had at its disposal an ad hoc short-range rocket system that could deliver a more powerful punch than an RPG-7 while preserving greater accuracy than artillery deployed outside the town. Rebel fighters spoke of Hizb Allah's ability to destroy specific buildings or entire street barricades with a missile.<sup>47</sup> It

later transpired that Hizb Allah used improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs) consisting of a large explosive charge of undetermined origin boosted by the rocket of a 107mm Katyusha.<sup>48</sup>

As the battle unfolded, the rebels were gradually pushed back into the northern area of Qusayr. Ammunition stocks began to dwindle as did food and water and with it the morale of the defending force. The rebels had received some reinforcements on the second day of the battle when a group reached the town from Bab Amr in Homs.<sup>49</sup> On June 2, a larger group of rebel fighters arrived in Qusayr having traveled from Deir al-Zour in the east and Aleppo in the north.<sup>50</sup> The commander of the Aleppo rebels was Colonel Abdul-Jabbar Mohammed Aqidi, the head of the Aleppo Military Council.<sup>51</sup> Yet the additional reinforcements, other than providing a momentary boost to flagging morale in the town, were unable to alter the course of the battle.

On June 3, the 17 rebel commanders held a meeting at which 14 of them voted to retreat from Qusayr.<sup>52</sup> Although they were apparently persuaded to change their minds, morale had declined significantly and the rebels realized that the town could not be held for much longer.<sup>53</sup> The rebels had been pushed into a small area in northern Qusayr—"10,000 people in a space no more than 500 square meters," as explained by one rebel fighter.<sup>54</sup> A Hizb Allah combatant who fought in Qusayr said, "we squashed them into

31 Personal interview, Hizb Allah combatants, Beirut, June 5, 2013.

32 Ibid. "Hezbollah Losses in Syria Steep, but Morale High," Agence France-Presse, May 24, 2013.

33 "Hezbollah Losses in Syria Steep, but Morale High."

34 Personal interview, Hizb Allah combatants, Beirut, June 5, 2013.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid. "A Look at the Fighting in Syria's Town of Qusayr," Associated Press, June 3, 2013; "Syrian Forces Storm Rebel Bastion of Qusayr," Agence France-Presse, May 20, 2013.

38 Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "Hezbollah Aids Syrian Military in a Key Battle," *New York Times*, May 19, 2013.

39 Radwan Mortada, "Syria: Qusayr Battle's Unofficial Story," *al-Akbar*, June 6, 2013.

40 Personal interviews, Hizb Allah combatants, Beirut, June 5, 2013.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

45 Ibid.

46 Personal interviews, Hizb Allah combatants, Beirut, June 5, 2013. The Dragunov 7.62mm rifle is the standard sniper rifle used by Hizb Allah.

47 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from

Qusayr, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013. The author was shown a video recorded on a Hizb Allah fighter's phone of the IRAM in action.

48 "DIY Weapons in Syria - Hezbollah Deploys IRAMs in Qusayr," Brown Moses blog, June 18, 2013.

49 "Abdel-Jabbar and the Commander Abdel-Qadir Give Advice to Hezbollah While in a Resting Area During Their Journey," May 22, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=l6y4aN\\_kYOU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=l6y4aN_kYOU).

50 Ibid.

51 "Colonel Abdel-Jabbar Aqidi's Message from the City of Qusayr," June 1, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=65zT73wNEUc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=65zT73wNEUc).

52 "Interview with Abdul-Jabbar Aqidi," June 14, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=On8NWqOcXm8#at=162](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=On8NWqOcXm8#at=162).

53 Ibid.

54 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

the northern part of the town and then pinned them down with sniper fire.”<sup>55</sup>

In addition to a shortage of ammunition and deteriorating morale, the rebels could no longer cope with large numbers of wounded and lack of food and water. Rebel fighters described scenes of children forced to drink sewage water, people eating leaves from trees, and wounds rotting due to lack of medicine.<sup>56</sup>

Walid Jumblatt, the paramount leader of Lebanon's Druze community and an arch critic of the al-Assad regime, intervened with Hizb Allah to seek a safe withdrawal of some 400 wounded militants from Qusayr.<sup>57</sup> Jumblatt's interlocutor was Wafiq Safa, a top Hizb Allah security official, who said that the party would accept whatever decision was made by the al-Assad regime. The regime refused to negotiate with the rebels in Qusayr, but said there was a known corridor to the north that was open.<sup>58</sup>

The battle concluded early on June 5 when the SAA and Hizb Allah launched a heavy bombardment of the last rebel-held enclave of Qusayr, described by one rebel fighter as the most intense shelling of the entire battle.<sup>59</sup> Rebels, civilians and wounded began streaming north from Qusayr toward the villages of Dabaa and then onto Buwaydah Sharqiyah. Instead of following a “safe” corridor to the villages, however, those fleeing Qusayr allegedly came under withering mortar and machine gun fire.<sup>60</sup> Survivors recounted people being shot around them as they ran through orchards.<sup>61</sup> One rebel recalled crawling

through a field, pushing a mortally wounded comrade in front of him as protection against machine gun fire.<sup>62</sup>

Most of the fleeing rebels and civilians avoided the roads and moved on foot around the northeastern corner of Lebanon to the area of Hassia on the Damascus-Homs highway before slipping into Lebanon.<sup>63</sup> Hundreds, possibly thousands, ended up in Aarsal, a Sunni populated town in northeast Lebanon that has served as a logistical hub for Syrian rebel groups in Qusayr and Homs to the north and rebel-held areas on the eastern side of the border.<sup>64</sup>

#### **Qusayr: A Test Case for Hizb Allah's Developing Offensive Tactics**

The 17-day battle for Qusayr took longer than Hizb Allah anticipated and caused a relatively high number of casualties.<sup>65</sup> Hizb Allah has not released a tally of its losses, but estimates range between 70 and 120 dead with dozens more wounded.<sup>66</sup> There were scattered reports during the campaign citing SAA and allied militia losses, but an overall total is unknown.<sup>67</sup> The figures suggest that Hizb Allah experienced its highest casualty attrition rate since the 34-day war against Israel in the summer of 2006. The rebels published the names of 431 fighters they said died in the battle, but the true figure is probably higher.<sup>68</sup> The outcome, however, was inevitable given the logistical resources at the disposal of the al-Assad regime compared to those of the town's rebel defenders. Qusayr's relative isolation from other rebel strongholds made it difficult to deliver material and logistical support. Qusayr was also close to Hizb Allah's supply lines in Lebanon via the Shi'a-populated villages on the Syrian side of the border. These reasons made Qusayr an appropriate test case for Hizb Allah to put its newly-acquired

urban warfare skills into practice with the SAA providing key artillery and aerial support.

Since 2006, Hizb Allah has included urban warfare skills in its training program at Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) camps in Lebanon and Iran. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hizb Allah pursued hit-and-run guerrilla-style tactics in a rural environment against Israeli troops then occupying southern Lebanon. The group fought in urban areas during the month-long war with Israel in 2006, but mainly in a defensive rather than offensive capacity. The post-2006 urban warfare training, which includes offensive and defensive tactics, is thought to be preparation for possible commando-style raids into Israel in the event of another war with the country.<sup>69</sup>

Qusayr allowed Hizb Allah to gain experience using these new skills. Furthermore, although the bulk of Hizb Allah combatants in Syria appear to be older combat veterans, a younger, post-2006 generation of recruits have been deployed into battles. The experience accrued in combat and urban warfare should make the organization a more formidable challenge in any future war against Israel, an assessment that has been recognized by the Israeli military.<sup>70</sup>

#### **After Qusayr: The Regime Tips the Balance**

During the Qusayr assault, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizb Allah's secretary general, admitted what by then was common knowledge—his cadres were heavily involved in fighting in Syria. Nasrallah's acknowledgement and the success at Qusayr paved the way for more open and tangible support by Hizb Allah for the al-Assad regime. In the wake of the Qusayr battle, Hizb Allah's fighters have been deployed

55 Personal interviews, Hizb Allah combatants, Beirut, June 5, 2013.

56 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

57 Ibid. Lauren Williams, “Twists in Qusayr Evacuation Plan Spark Confusion,” *Daily Star*, June 14, 2013; “PSP Leader Mediates Between Jabhat al-Nusra and Hizbullah,” *al-Akhabbar*, June 4, 2013; Saleh Hodaife, “Rebel Withdrawal from al-Qusayr Result of Deal with Hezbollah,” *Now Lebanon*, June 5, 2013.

58 Jean Aziz, “Qusayr Victory Could Prove Fateful for Hezbollah's Role,” *al-Monitor*, June 6, 2013; “PSP Leader Mediates Between Jabhat al-Nusra and Hizbullah”; Williams.

59 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

60 Ibid.; Williams.

61 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from

Qusayr, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Personal observations and interviews, residents of Aarsal, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013.

65 Mortada, “Syria: Qusayr Battle's Unofficial Story.”

66 Ibid. “Hezbollah Losses Laid Bare After Victory in Syrian Town,” Sapa-DPA, June 6, 2013; “Hezbollah Operatives Killed in Syria,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, July 2013.

67 “The Free Syrian Army is Called to Defend Qoussair,” *Le Monde*, May 22, 2013.

68 Mortada, “Syria: Qusayr Battle's Unofficial Story.”

69 Personal interviews, multiple Hizb Allah fighters, Lebanon, 2007-2008. In a speech on February 16, 2011, Hizb Allah leader Hassan Nasrallah alluded for the first time to a possible incursion into northern Israel in the event of a war: “I tell the Resistance fighters to be prepared for the day when war is imposed on Lebanon. Then, the Resistance leadership might ask you to lead the Resistance to liberate Galilee.” Also see Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, p. 460.

70 Yoav Zitun, “Top IDF Officer: Hezbollah Marked Our Artillery Guns,” *ynetnews.com*, August 7, 2013.

to southern Deraa province, Idlib and Aleppo provinces in the north and in the Damascus suburbs.<sup>71</sup>

The defeat of the rebels in Qusayr has allowed the al-Assad regime to gain ground along the crucial corridor linking Damascus to Tartus and the Mediterranean coast. Furthermore, it had a knock-on effect of compelling the rebel defenders of Tel Kalakh, which lies close to the Homs-Tartus highway, two miles north of the border with Lebanon and 21 miles northwest of Qusayr, to surrender the town in June 2013 to government forces after a two-year siege.<sup>72</sup> The rebels in Tel Kalakh recognized that they could no longer hold out against the SAA given dwindling food supplies and expectations that the fall of Qusayr could be a prelude to a similar assault against them.<sup>73</sup>

Fresh from victory in Qusayr, the SAA turned its attention to regaining the last rebel-held pockets in Homs, a strategically placed transport node. On July 29, the Syrian regime announced that the SAA had seized the central district of Khaldiya in Homs. The retaking of Khaldiya was facilitated by the rebels apparently deciding to “sacrifice” the city to concentrate on holding its ground in northern Aleppo Province and around Damascus.<sup>74</sup>

Yet there are indications that the rebels are planning to mount a counterattack against SAA forces in Qusayr to recapture the town.<sup>75</sup> Lebanese and

Syrian rebels say that the units that retreated from Qusayr have regrouped and are located in and around the town of Yabroud in the Qalamoun area that lies between Damascus and Homs adjacent to the Lebanese border.<sup>76</sup> Arms supplies have increased following the seizure on August 2 of three SAA arms depots at Danha in the Qalamoun area, which yielded large quantities of anti-tank missiles, including AT-5 Spandrel, Metis-M and AT-14 Kornet.<sup>77</sup> One Syrian rebel fighter said that reconnaissance has been conducted in the Qusayr area and an assault is imminent.<sup>78</sup> The wisdom of such a move might be questioned given the expected fall of Homs and the relative isolation of Qusayr from other rebel-held areas. Furthermore, the rebels deployed in Qalamoun are expecting a Hizb Allah-led assault against the area once Homs has fallen.<sup>79</sup> Diverting rebels from the Qalamoun area for an attack on Qusayr would weaken their ability to confront a Hizb Allah and SAA assault.

#### Hizb Allah's Activities in Syria Still Limited

Although Hizb Allah spearheaded the strike on Qusayr, the party has played more of a support role in its other engagements across Syria. In street fighting in Homs, for example, veteran Hizb Allah fighters command squads of Syrian soldiers, essentially acting as non-commissioned officers (NCO) to the less experienced regular troops.<sup>80</sup>

Hizb Allah does not have the capacity to replicate its role in Qusayr by taking the tactical lead in assaults against major urban areas. This is partly due to a limit on the number of fighters Hizb Allah

can afford to deploy to Syria. Despite Hizb Allah's focus on Syria, Israel remains the paramount threat to the organization, and its confrontation with the Jewish state remains its *raison d'être*. This was made evident on August 7 when at least two IEDs exploded beside a unit of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers who had penetrated Lebanese territory up to a distance of around 400 meters on an as yet undisclosed mission.<sup>81</sup> The IDF unit reportedly fell into a Hizb Allah ambush, illustrating the vigilance that the group continues to exert in its traditional theater of conflict along the Lebanon-Israel border.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, Hizb Allah may be called upon to take the lead in future campaigns to capture isolated towns similarly sized or smaller than Qusayr. One example is the Qalamoun area, centered on the rebel-held towns of Yabroud and Nabk. It is the last section of the border with Lebanon open to rebel traffic. Rebels use dirt tracks that wind east and southeast of Aarsal through an arid mountainous landscape to move back and forth between Lebanon and Syria.<sup>83</sup> Hizb Allah has conducted reconnaissance of the Yabroud area in preparation for an attack against the rebels.<sup>84</sup> If the Qalamoun area falls to the regime, it will effectively seal off rebel support from Lebanon to Syria. Furthermore, and depending on the outcome of the mooted rebel counterattack on Qusayr, it will allow the regime to exert full control over the strategic corridor between Damascus and Tartus.

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71 Wassim Mroueh, “Analysts See Qusayr as First Hezbollah Step in Syria,” *Daily Star*, June 6, 2013; Jana El-Hassan, “4,000 Hezbollah Fighters Reach Rebel-Held Aleppo: FSA,” *Daily Star*, June 4, 2013; “Hezbollah Fighters Seen in Daraa Province,” SyriaDirect.org, June 14, 2013; “Jordan Salafists Warn Hezbollah of Advancing to Jordan-Syria Border,” Amman [Amman], May 14, 2013; Nuha Shabaan, “Rebels say Hezbollah, Iraqi Fighters Flooding into Syria,” *USA Today*, June 4, 2013.

72 Patrick Cockburn, “Tel Kalakh: Syria's Rebel Town that Forged its Own Peace Deal,” *Independent*, June 25, 2013.

73 Ibid. Personal interview, Syrian activist from Tel Kalakh, north Lebanon, August 7, 2013; personal interview, Lebanese logistical supporter for the rebels, Akkar Province, Lebanon, August 8, 2013.

74 Personal interview, European diplomat in contact with the al-Assad regime and Syrian opposition groups, telephone interview, July 11, 2013.

75 Personal interview, Lebanese logistical supporter for the rebels, Akkar Province, Lebanon; personal interview,

Lebanese fighter with the Farouq Battalions, northern Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, August 8, 2013.

76 Ibid.

77 The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 3, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvDUHuEwKI&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvDUHuEwKI&feature=youtu.be) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PRIIOds83I&feature=c4-overview&list=UUEFYpPLGO92Bmc5DpTxITQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PRIIOds83I&feature=c4-overview&list=UUEFYpPLGO92Bmc5DpTxITQ).

78 Personal interview, Farouq Battalions rebel, Aarsal, Lebanon, August 12, 2013.

79 Personal interviews, multiple rebel fighters from Qusayr, Aarsal, Lebanon, June 13, 2013; personal interview, Farouq Battalions rebel, Aarsal, Lebanon, August 3, 2013; personal interview, Lebanese logistical supporter for the rebels, Akkar Province, Lebanon, August 8, 2013.

80 Personal interview, Hizb Allah fighter, Beirut, July 11, 2013.

81 Ibrahim al-Amine, “The Lowdown on Hezbollah's Ambush in South Lebanon,” *al-Akhbar*, August 8, 2013.

82 Ibid.

83 Nicholas Blanford, “Lebanese Brace for Violence if Assad Cuts Off Rebels' Lifeline,” *Times* [London], August 5, 2013.

84 Personal interview, Hizb Allah fighter, Beirut, July 11, 2013.



## The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria

By Aron Lund

THE UPRISING AGAINST Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that began in 2011 has always been disorganized, and it has become increasingly reliant on foreign support. It has grown large enough, however, to push regime forces out of vast areas of Syria's north and east. According to a recent estimate by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, an estimated 1,200 rebel groups are currently fighting against the al-Assad government.<sup>1</sup>

Most of these factions first emerged out of a narrow local context, typically in a rural Sunni Arab village or neighborhood. With the passage of time, however, many have merged into bigger formations and connected across provincial boundaries, creating a web of interlocking alliances. These unity efforts have typically been initiated and sustained by foreign actors, including states, exiled Syrian businessmen and activists, and Islamist aid groups, which thereby gained leverage over their ideological and political agendas. The result is an extraordinarily complex insurgency, trapped in a political dynamic shaped by parochial roots on the one hand and international influences on the other, but seemingly unable to develop effective national actors.

This article identifies and profiles some of the most important non-state actors in Syria. It finds that the opposition remains severely fragmented. Although foreign-backed efforts to realize the long-standing goal of a central "Free Syrian Army" leadership for the mainstream insurgency have achieved some progress recently, the resulting Supreme Military Command has little internal cohesion and is held together almost entirely by outside funding. The Syrian regime has also begun to experience a fragmentation of its security apparatus, caused by its increased reliance on local and foreign militia forces, although these problems are still in their early stages.

1 Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Intelligence Official Says Syrian War Could Last for Years," *New York Times*, July 20, 2013.

### Anti-Assad Rebel Groups

#### *The Free Syrian Army*

Media reporting has consistently focused on the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but the FSA has always been more of a brand name than an actual organization. The term was first used by the Turkey-based military defector Colonel Riad al-Asaad, who in late July 2011 issued a statement proclaiming himself supreme commander of a rebel army, which he dubbed the FSA.<sup>2</sup> The name quickly became popular among the autonomous armed factions that had begun to spring up across Syria. Their widespread use of the FSA brand gave the impression of a unified movement, but no nationwide FSA structure was ever created to match the name.

The uprising's international backers—chief among them Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States—have since early 2012 repeatedly sought to encourage a centralized rebel leadership by using their control over funding and weapons shipments to coax local commanders into larger alliances. A number of such coalitions were formed during the past two years, many using the FSA name. Yet a multitude of practical difficulties, as well as flare-ups of an old Saudi-Qatari rivalry, long undermined these efforts.

#### *The General Staff of the Military and Revolutionary Forces*

The most recent and ambitious attempt to create an "FSA" leadership occurred in December 2012, when the General Staff of the Military and Revolutionary Forces was formed at a conference in Antalya, following concerted pressure from Saudi Arabia and other financiers.<sup>3</sup> This group, which built on earlier unification attempts, is often referred to as the Supreme Military Command (SMC). Today, the SMC and FSA names are often used interchangeably, although the FSA term also remains in use as a catch-all phrase for the insurgency in general.

2 "Announcement of the Creation of the Free Syrian Army. Colonel Riad al-Asaad," July 29, 2011, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItzI\\_AIFUWg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItzI_AIFUWg).

3 The best current study on the SMC is Elizabeth O'Bagy, "The Free Syrian Army," Institute for the Study of War, March 24, 2013.

The SMC is formally led by Brigadier General Salim Idris, but there is no evidence that it functions as a conventional military organization or that Idris enjoys real control over member factions. To the contrary, member groups retain their separate identities and operational autonomy and proclaim loyalty to their own commanders.<sup>4</sup>

The SMC, however, facilitates coordination between these member groups and serves as a joint political platform. Most of all, it is intended to function as a unified distribution channel for military supplies and funds from the uprising's main state backers. Rebels have been told by these states that they must endorse the SMC and its politics to gain access to future arms shipments.<sup>5</sup> Recently, the United States, the United Kingdom and France have all indicated that they will channel money and possibly weapons via the SMC.<sup>6</sup>

The SMC has provided wildly varying estimates of the total number of fighters in its member groups. In June 2013, Idris claimed to control 80,000 fighters, but days later an SMC representative insisted that the true figure is 320,000.<sup>7</sup> In practice, a meaningful headcount of rebels is almost impossible to make, both due to the scarcity of reliable information and to myriad problems of definition.<sup>8</sup> There is no disputing, however, that most of Syria's large rebel factions have chosen to publicly align themselves with the SMC, recognizing it as the best way to tap into Gulf, Western and other support.

4 Ibid. Personal interviews, spokespersons of the SMC and several SMC-affiliated armed factions, Skype and e-mail correspondence, spring and summer 2013.

5 Phil Sands, "Gulf States Put New Conditions on Arms Supplies to Syrian Rebels," *The National*, April 7, 2013; "Qatar Tightens Coordination on Syria Arms Flow," Reuters, May 15, 2013.

6 O'Bagy; Liz Sly, "Defector Syrian General Will be Conduit for U.S. Military Aid to Rebels," *Washington Post*, June 16, 2013. The European Union embargo on Syria has formally been modified, following pressure from France and the United Kingdom, to allow deliveries of arms to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, but in practice this means the SMC, since the national coalition has no other armed wing.

7 Sly; personal interview, SMC spokesperson Mohammed al-Mustafa, Skype, June 2013.

8 The numbers cited in this text are only as credible as their sources.

By providing centralized funding, these states seek to build up Idris and the core SMC command as an effective and sympathetic leadership, able to control the insurgency and negotiate on its behalf. As a *quid pro quo* for SMC support, members are expected to distance themselves from al-Qa`ida-linked factions such as Jabhat al-Nusra and other forces hostile to the SMC's backers, and track any arms provided to them. They are also expected to obey orders from Idris and recognize the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a group of exiled politicians supported by these same states. In practice, compliance with these terms seems to vary considerably, and some factions pay only lip service to SMC conditions. Most representatives of SMC-linked rebel groups interviewed by the author have voiced mixed or negative opinions of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and are reluctant to fully recognize it as their political leadership.

At this stage, rebel leaders who have joined the SMC retain control over their own forces, effectively reducing Idris to a figurehead role. Many SMC-linked commanders are simultaneously involved with other foreign-funded alliances and benefit from additional and often more generous sources of support. This helps ensure their continued autonomy from the SMC's core leadership.

The insurgency's foreign backers still hope that strong and continuous funding through the central SMC apparatus will increase the rebels' dependency on its support functions, enabling it to expand its influence and develop into a real military leadership over time.

#### *The Syria Islamic Liberation Front*

Some of the SMC's most powerful commanders are also members of an older coalition called the Syria Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), established in September 2012.<sup>9</sup> It currently consists of around 20 rebel groups, all of which have joined the SMC. A SILF representative claims that they

collectively control 35,000-40,000 fighters.<sup>10</sup> Some of the more well-known rebel groups that are part of the SILF include: the Farouq Battalions, a national network with roots in Homs; the Islamic Farouq Battalions, mainly in Homs-Hama; the Tawhid Brigade, mainly in Aleppo; the Fath Brigade, also in Aleppo; the Islam Brigade, mainly in Damascus; the Suqour al-Sham Brigades, mainly in Idlib; and the Deir al-Zour Revolutionaries' Council, a coalition of eastern groups.

The Farouq Battalions first emerged in Homs Province in late summer 2011, and they gained prominence in the battle of Baba Amr in February 2012.<sup>11</sup> Since then, the group has grown into a sprawling network of militias across Syria, and they now claim to control some 14,000 fighters.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps as a result of their rapid expansion, the Farouq Battalions have suffered repeated splits. Their first leader, First Lieutenant `Abd al-Razzaq Tlass, was ousted after a sex scandal in October 2012, and he later joined the Asala wa-al-Tanmiya Front.<sup>13</sup> Two other leading figures, Amjad Bitar and Bilal al-Jurayhi, were expelled in the spring of 2013 after organizing a breakaway faction called the Islamic Farouq Battalions.<sup>14</sup> A smaller 2012 splinter group called the Independent Omar el-Farouq Battalion made headlines early in 2013 after its leader was caught on camera desecrating and pretending to eat the corpse of a pro-Assad fighter.<sup>15</sup>

The Islamist-leaning Tawhid Brigade belatedly joined the SILF in January 2013.<sup>16</sup> It was first created in July 2012 as a merger of militias from the northern Aleppo countryside, and quickly seized a part of Aleppo City. Its formal head is `Abd al-`Aziz Salame ("Hajji Anadan"), but his deputy `Abd al-Qadir Salih ("Hajji Mari") runs the military wing and may be the de facto leader. Tawhid was recently reorganized into nearly 30 sub-factions, most of them in the Aleppo region. It claims to control some 11,000 fighters in total.<sup>17</sup>

Ahmad `Isa commands the Suqour al-Sham Brigades and is also the head of the SILF itself. His group claims to have 17 sub-brigades totaling at least 9,000 fighters, although some recently defected to form the independent Dawood Brigade.<sup>18</sup> Suqour al-Sham belongs to the most stringently Islamist wing of the SMC/SILF, along with the Salafist figure Zahran Alloush, who heads the Islam Brigade and is also the SILF's secretary-general.<sup>19</sup>

#### *The Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades*

The pro-SMC Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, a moderate Islamist alliance that allegedly operates on Qatari money,<sup>20</sup> were created in 2012 and grew in influence through early 2013. They have now co-opted around 50 groups across Syria, including in the southern provinces of Damascus, Deraa and Qunaytira, although they are by far strongest in the Idlib region.<sup>21</sup> An Ahfad al-Rasoul source has informally estimated their numbers to be above

10 Personal interview, SILF spokesperson, e-mail correspondence, June 2013.

11 David Enders, "Rare Inside View of Syria's Rebels Finds a Force Vowing to Fight On," McClatchy Newspapers, April 23, 2012.

12 Personal interview, Yezid al-Hassan, spokesperson of the Farouq Battalions, Skype, June 2013.

13 "Statement Issued by the Political Commission of the Farouq Battalions in Syria," Farouq Battalions website, October 6, 2012; "Announcement of the Creation of the Asala wa-Tanmiya Front, November 10, 2012 AD," November 11, 2012, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnUuWZexlHO](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnUuWZexlHO).

14 "Farouq Battalions: The military spokesperson Mohammed al-Ruz reads the statement of the executive office about severing all relations between Amjad al-Bitar and Bilal al-Jurayhi (Basem Amer) and the Farouq Battalions," Farouq Battalions website, April 13, 2013.

15 Paul Wood, "Face-to-Face with Abu Sakkar, Syria's 'Heart-Eating Cannibal,'" BBC, July 5, 2013.

16 "The Tawhid Brigade Joins the Syria Islamic Liberation Front," Tawhid Brigade website, January 10, 2013.

17 Personal interview, Abu Obeida, spokesperson for `Abd al-Qadir Salih, Skype, June 2013; *Liqa al-Yawm*, al-Jazira, June 15, 2013.

18 Personal interview, Ahmed Asi, director of the Suqour al-Sham Brigades' media office, e-mail correspondence, June 2013.

19 *Liqa al-Yawm*, al-Jazira, June 19, 2013; personal interview, Mohammed Alloush, SILF executive director, internet correspondence, June 2013.

20 Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution," *Financial Times*, May 17, 2013.

21 For details, see the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades website, available at [www.ahfadalarasoul.com](http://www.ahfadalarasoul.com). Also see personal interview, Ibrahim al-Idlebi, director of the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades' media office, Skype, June 2013; personal interview, anonymous diplomatic sources, 2013.

9 "Founding Statement for the Syria Liberation Front," Farouq Battalions website, September 12, 2012. "Syria Liberation Front" was the original name of the group, with "Islamic" added later.

10,000, but this is impossible to verify.<sup>22</sup>

#### *The Asala wa-al-Tanmiya Front*

The Asala wa-al-Tanmiya Front, led by `Abd al-Qadir Da`fis, also supports the SMC. It was created in late 2012 and claims to have unified approximately 36 factions comprised of 13,000 fighters and civilian auxiliaries, organized across five "fronts" covering most of Syria. It presents itself as a moderate Salafist movement.<sup>23</sup> Its best known member groups are the Ahl al-Athar Battalions, spread across several provinces but strongest in the tribal areas of eastern Syria, and the Nouredin al-Zengi Battalions, a rebel coalition in the Aleppo region.

#### *Ansar al-Islam Gathering*

In August 2012, seven Damascene groups created the Ansar al-Islam Gathering, but it quickly began to crumble, with factions peeling off to join the SILF, the Syrian Islamic Front, and Ahfad al-Rasoul instead.<sup>24</sup> The most recent defector was Mohammed al-Khatib and his Furqan Brigades, active west of Damascus down toward the Golan Heights.<sup>25</sup> Of the remaining factions, the al-Habib al-Mustafa Brigade and the Sahaba Brigades are the most important. The Sahaba Brigades spokesperson, Abu Mu`adh al-Agha, now leads the Ansar al-Islam Gathering.

#### *Durou al-Thawra Commission*

Another alliance linked to the SMC is Brigadier General Sami Hamza's Durou al-Thawra Commission, created in 2012 with assistance from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>26</sup> The commission, which

presents itself as a moderate Islamic-democratic movement, is composed of a few dozen small armed factions, most of them in Idlib or Hama.<sup>27</sup> Many Syrian opposition activists consider the commission a *bona fide* armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, but the typically secretive Brotherhood has admitted only to supporting the group and shies away from acknowledging any real organizational ties.<sup>28</sup> A spokesperson for the commission has confirmed that it receives support from the Brotherhood and that it considers their interpretation of Islam to be "the best school of thought" for Syria, but he refused to admit a direct link.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Other Mainstream Rebel Factions*

There are hundreds of additional rebel units and coalitions. Many are affiliated with the SMC or some other large alliance, but there are also those that work alone. Most seem to be small groups representing a single village or a few families, but some are far bigger and capable of offensive operations even outside their home region.

For example, the Syria Martyrs' Brigade is active alongside Suqour al-Sham in the Jabal al-Zawiya region of Idlib. Its leader, Jamal Ma`rouf, at one point boasted of 18,000 men, although this must have been an exaggeration.<sup>30</sup> The Ahrar Souriya Brigade from Anadan, which says it has nearly 2,500 fighters, has carved up a fiefdom in the northern suburbs of Aleppo.<sup>31</sup> Another locally influential faction, the Northern Storm Brigade, shares control with the Tawhid Brigade over an important border crossing between Turkey and Syria.<sup>32</sup>

In the Deraa region, there are local factions such as the Yarmouk Brigade and the Maghawir Houran Gathering, both created this winter.<sup>33</sup>

#### **The Hardline Islamist Factions**

##### *Ahrar al-Sham and the Syrian Islamic Front*

The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) was formed by 11 Islamist groups in December 2012.<sup>34</sup> It is strongly dominated by its largest faction, the Islamic Ahrar al-Sham Movement, whose leader Hassan Abboud (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi) doubles as president of the SIF. By May 2013, most original SIF factions had merged into Ahrar al-Sham, which now operates armed groups all over Syria. Other current SIF members include the Haq Brigade (Homs), the Ansar al-Sham Battalions (Latakia-Idlib), the Tawhid Army (Deir al-Zour), and the Mujahedi al-Sham Brigade (Hama).<sup>35</sup> In late 2012, the SIF informally suggested that it controls nearly 30,000 fighters, but it has since refused to confirm this figure or provide a new one.<sup>36</sup>

are Holding the Shiites in Syria," SyriaComment, August 11, 2013.

33 Videos were released announcing the creation of both groups. See "Announcement of the Creation of the Maghawir Houran Battalions Gathering," January 28, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpDJFktin8Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpDJFktin8Q); "Announcement of the Creation of the Yarmouk Battalion - Deraa, December 27, 2012," December 27, 2012, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LG\\_YE2LynAQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LG_YE2LynAQ). The Yarmouk Brigade should not be confused with the Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade, a smaller group active on the Golan Heights cease-fire line, which has been involved in several kidnappings of UN observer troops.

34 Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front."

35 For a fuller description of the SIF groups and their mergers and coalitions, see Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front"; Aron Lund, "New Addition to the Syrian Islamic Front," SyriaComment, May 3, 2013. The Mujahedi al-Sham Brigade was created recently through a merger of local factions with the Tayybet al-Imam-based Haqq Battalions Gathering. See "Announcement of the Creation of the Mujahedi al-Sham Brigade in Hama," August 3, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3nH-Mdrg2U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3nH-Mdrg2U).

36 "Statement on the Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb Battalion's Facebook Site," December 22, 2012; personal interview, Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haq Political Office, Skype, February, 2013; personal interview, Mohammed Talal Bazerbashi, official spokesperson of the SIF and member of the Ahrar al-Sham leadership, internet correspondence, June 2013.

22 Ibid.

23 Personal interview, Abu Yazin, media spokesperson for the Asala wa-al-Tanmiya Front, Skype, June 2013.

24 For more on the rise and fall of Ansar al-Islam, see Aron Lund, "Syrian Jihadism," Swedish Institute of International Affairs, September 17, 2012; Aron Lund, "The Islamist Mess in Damascus," SyriaComment, February 9, 2013; Aron Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," Swedish Institute for International Affairs, March 19, 2013. The author is grateful to the British-Syrian opposition journalist Malik al-Abdeh for some of this information, interviewed via Skype in February 2013.

25 "Statement about the Withdrawal of the Furqan Divisions from the Ansar al-Islam Gathering," Furqan Divisions website, April 11, 2013.

26 For more on this group, see Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria," Carn-

egie Endowment for International Peace, May 7, 2013.

27 Ibid.

28 Personal interview, Molham al-Droubi, member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leadership, e-mail correspondence, January 2013; Abdullah al-Ghadawi, "The Hesitation of the West Exacerbated 'The Extremism'... Syria Will Not Become an Iraq or a Scene for Revenge," *Okaz*, January 12, 2013.

29 Personal interview, Durou' al-Thawra Commission spokesperson Khaled Suleiman, e-mail correspondence, July 2013.

30 *Muqabala Khassa*, al-Arabiya, December 30, 2012.

31 *Muqabala Khassa*, al-Arabiya, February 3, 2013.

32 "Agreement Between the Northern Storm Brigade and the Tawhid Brigade About Joint Control Over the Bab al-Salama Crossing at the Turkish Border," *Aks al-Ser*, July 9, 2013; "Why Were the Turks Kidnapped in Lebanon and Who are the Liwaa Asifat al-Shamal who



Ahrar al-Sham was never a part of the SMC, but it has a record of working well with its affiliates. One SIF faction, the Haq Brigade, has a seat on the SMC's Homs Command, but the SIF itself has rejected both the SMC and the Syrian National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. It is an explicitly Salafist alliance that makes no pretense of supporting democracy, instead demanding an Islamic state.<sup>37</sup> The SIF and Ahrar al-Sham have had an excellent working relationship with al-Qa`ida factions such as Jabhat al-Nusra, and regularly praise their contributions on the battlefield. Yet they have also cautiously marked their differences with the most radical jihadists, and spoken against a "regionalization" of the Syrian war—a tactful reference to al-Qa`ida's global jihad.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Al-Qa`ida and the Salafi-Jihadi Hardliners*

Al-Qa`ida has taken a keen interest in the Syrian war. In mid- to late-2011, its Iraqi affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), helped create Jabhat al-Nusra,<sup>39</sup> a Syrian spinoff that declared its existence publicly in January 2012. The U.S. government listed it as a terrorist group in December 2012.<sup>40</sup>

In April 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra split.<sup>41</sup> The ISI's *amir*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced that he would unite the Syrian and Iraqi factions under his own command, called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>42</sup> Jabhat

al-Nusra's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, however, rejected the decision.<sup>43</sup> Al-Qa`ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri allegedly tried to resolve the dispute through a Solomonic settlement, blaming both groups equally and ordering them to remain in their country of origin.<sup>44</sup> Al-Baghdadi refused the mediation, saying that this would consecrate an illegitimate colonial border.<sup>45</sup> Instead, the ISIL has dismissed the idea of Jabhat al-Nusra as an independent entity and portrays al-Julani as a soldier gone rogue.<sup>46</sup>

By July 2013, both Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIL are separately active in Syria, and the latter also in Iraq.<sup>47</sup> Relations with other rebels vary from location to location, but the ISIL seems to be viewed with more suspicion due to its foreign connections, perceived extremism, and dominant ambitions suggested by its self-designation as a "state." There are few reports about infighting, however, and in many areas Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIL seem to work together.

Of the other Salafi-jihadi factions in Syria, the most prominent has been Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa-al-Ansar. It consists of hundreds of mostly foreign fighters in the Aleppo area, led by a Chechen jihadist called Abu Omar al-Shishani who has now aligned himself with the ISIL. There are also several smaller independent jihadist groups, such as the Homs-based Jund al-Sham, which draw on militant networks in northern Lebanon.<sup>48</sup> A few small Syro-Lebanese networks that predate the 2011 uprising are still active, such as Fatah al-Islam and the Abdullah Azzam Battalions.<sup>49</sup>

43 "English Translation: Speech of the General Commander of Jabhat Al-Nusra Abu Mohammed al-Golani about the al-Sham front," Ansar al-Mujahidin forum, April 18, 2013.

44 Basma Atassi, "Qaeda Chief Annuls Syrian-Iraqi Jihad Merger," al-Jazeera, June 9, 2013.

45 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Remaining in Iraq and the Levant," June 15, 2013.

46 "Speech by the Mujahed Sheikh Abu Mohammed al-Adnani entitled: 'So, leave them and their deceptions,'" Sanam al-Islam forum, June 28, 2013.

47 There is not enough evidence to determine to which group the majority of fighters went.

48 Personal interview, Jund al-Sham spokesperson "Abu Hamza," internet correspondence, July 2013.

49 Aron Lund, "Holy Warriors," *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2012.

#### **Syrian Kurds and the PKK**

##### *The Popular Protection Units*

The Popular Protection Units (YPG) is a secular, mixed-gender Kurdish militia led by Sipan Hemo. It has controlled most Kurdish towns in northern Syria since al-Assad's army withdrew from these areas in the summer of 2012. Formally, the YPG operates on behalf of the Supreme Kurdish Committee, a feckless umbrella organization. In practice, it is an armed wing of the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), a Syrian front for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>50</sup>

The PKK/PYD/YPG have tried to forge a middle path between al-Assad and his opposition, and sought to keep the Kurds out of the war. They have occasionally defended against regime incursions, but more often clashed with Arab rebels, particularly Islamist factions and Turkey-backed groups. The YPG's ambiguous political stance and its reluctance to confront the regime has provoked anti-Assad Arab groups, some of which refer to the YPG as "Kurdish Shabiha." Pre-existing Arab-Kurdish tensions have added fuel to the fire.

When left to their own devices, the Syrian PKK affiliates have focused on ensuring party control over all Kurdish areas and repressing or co-opting local rivals. In July 2013, they unveiled plans to set up a mechanism for Kurdish "self-administration" within Syria, with a parliament and constitution.<sup>51</sup>

#### **Syrian and Foreign Pro-Government Militias**

The activities of Syrian and foreign pro-government militias have been obscured by the leading role of the official Syrian Arab Army, but there are a number of non-state and foreign-linked actors in Syria that fight for the al-Assad regime.

37 See the SIF charter, available at [www.archive.org/download/Mithaq/Mithaq.pdf](http://www.archive.org/download/Mithaq/Mithaq.pdf). For a fuller discussion, see Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front."

38 Aron Lund, "Major Salafi Faction Criticizes Jabhat al-Nusra," SyriaComment, May 4, 2013.

39 The ISI's role in helping to establish Jabhat al-Nusra has now been confirmed by both the Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani and the ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in their April 2013 statements, although they differ on the implications of this.

40 "Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime," U.S. Treasury Department, December 11, 2012.

41 For an excellent chronological walkthrough of statements by the actors involved, see "Special Report on the Power Struggle Between al-Qaeda Branches and Leadership," SITE Institute, July 1, 2013.

42 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Islamic State of Iraq: Announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - Speech by Emir al-Mouminin Abu Bakr | April 9," April 9, 2013.

50 "Official announcement of the Creation of the Popular Protection Units," Welate Roje, July 19, 2012; "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle," International Crisis Group, January 22, 2013; Eva Savelsberg, "The Kurdish Factor in the Syrian Revolution," *Syrian Studies Association Bulletin* 18:1 (2013); Mutlu Civirolu, "YPG Commander: Kurds Are Bulwark Against Islamic Extremism in Syria," *Rûdaw*, July 22, 2013.

51 Sherzad Sheikhani, "'Elected' Parliament and 'Own' Constitution in the Syrian Kurdish Areas Within Three Months," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 14, 2013.

The war has stirred up a significant Shi'a Islamist mobilization in surrounding countries, encouraged by Iran. Hizb Allah has backed al-Assad with expertise, by organizing Shi'a militias in Syria and monitoring

**“Major infighting among Syria’s rebel groups has been relatively rare, but time will inevitably chip away at the insurgents’ original unity of purpose.”**

and intimidating anti-Assad activists in Lebanon. In 2013, it stepped up its previously low-key raids into Syria from northern Lebanon. The group played an important role in the regime’s re-conquest of Qusayr, on the Syrian-Lebanese border, in May and June 2013.

Another Twelver Shi'a group, called Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas, has taken up positions around the Sayyida Zaynab shrine area in southern Damascus, recruiting from the local Shi'a immigrant community and sympathetic factions in Iraq. Some other Shi'a militant factions are fighting for al-Assad as well.

*The “Shabiha” Phenomenon*

The al-Assad regime is also supported by its own militias, often referred to in the media as *shabiha*. This catch-all term for al-Assad supporters was popularized by the opposition in 2011, but there is no organization by that name.<sup>52</sup> Armed support for the regime has come from many different sources, including clients of the intelligence services, Ba'athist true believers, old paramilitary groups created in the early decades of Ba'ath Party rule, and armed gangs in thrall to individual members of the ruling family.

<sup>52</sup> That has not prevented the U.S. government from formally sanctioning “The Shabbiha” as if it were an organized militia. See “Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime,” U.S. Treasury Department, December 11, 2012.

At the start of the uprising, several families and tribes who had enjoyed government patronage organized vigilante groups. In Aleppo, the Berri mafia—a criminal gang from a politically-connected Sunni clan—helped quash demonstrations until rebels massacred several Berri leaders in July 2012.<sup>53</sup> In multi-religious areas, the regime has recruited with most success among minorities. In Qusayr, for example, members of a Greek Orthodox clan and Alawite villagers helped to repress the mostly Sunni demonstrators in 2011.<sup>54</sup> In Latakia Province, a faction known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Iskanderoun/Syrian Resistance, led by a radical Marxist refugee from Turkey, has emerged as the preeminent Alawite paramilitary force.<sup>55</sup>

Regime-connected businessmen have provided much of the funding for such groups. The most well-known example is the president’s cousin, Rami Makhoul, who has used his business fortune to sustain militia activity across the country.<sup>56</sup> In Homs, he is a main sponsor of militias drawn from the local Alawite population.<sup>57</sup>

*Official Pro-Assad Militia Formations*

From the first months of the uprising, so-called Popular Committees began to form across Syria. They typically function as a lightly armed neighborhood watch, with volunteers manning checkpoints and conducting night patrols in their home areas.

The Popular Army—an old paramilitary wing of al-Assad’s Ba’ath Party—has worked more as a cohesive militia force, and at times participated in offensives alongside the regular army.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Eliot Higgins, “Aleppo - Zaino Berri, Shabiha Leader, Captured And Executed,” Brown Moses blog, July 31, 2012; “Zeino Berri Martyred in Aleppo, People’s Council Member Hassan Shaaban Berri Wounded,” *Cham Times*, August 1, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Sam Dagher, “Syrian Conflict Draws In Christians,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Aron Lund, “Gangs of Latakia: The Militiafication of the Assad Regime,” SyriaComment, July 23, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Aziz Nakkash, “The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity and the Making of a Community,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, March 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Marah Mashi, “People’s Committees in Syria: Patroling Local Borders,” *al-Akhbar*, September 4, 2012.

There have been growing reports of friction and even minor clashes between the regular Syrian Arab Army and rogue Popular Committees.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps fearing a fragmentation of the security apparatus, the regime has sought to impose a more organized structure on its armed supporters. From mid-2012, hundreds of Popular Committees and other irregulars merged into what eventually became the National Defense Forces.<sup>60</sup> President Bashar al-Assad has described the group as “local citizens fighting alongside the army to defend their communities and regions.”<sup>61</sup> Members draw a government paycheck, and some have reportedly received specialist training in Iran.<sup>62</sup>

**Conclusion**

Syria’s insurgent movement remains extraordinarily fractured, even after two years of warfare. The December 2012 creation of the SMC seems to have facilitated cooperation among the insurgents and established a framework for more effective unification, but it is still far from a functioning rebel leadership. Complicating matters further, several of the insurgency’s strongest factions—including the SIF, both al-Qa’ida wings, and the Kurdish YPG—actively oppose the SMC. The SMC’s influence is likely to grow only if it receives unified and sustained foreign support, including more advanced weapons, but the success of such a strategy depends on the uncertainties of American, European and Arab politics.

Thus far, major infighting among Syria’s rebel groups has been relatively rare, but time will inevitably chip away at the insurgents’ original

<sup>59</sup> Lund, “Gangs of Latakia: The Militiafication of the Assad Regime”; “They forced him and his men to kneel... the ‘Shabbiha’ strips a security officer of his arms because of a problem in the bread line in Aleppo!” *Aks al-Ser*, August 1, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> In some areas at least, the National Defense Forces include female fighters. See “In Assad’s Syria, Women a Small, Symbolic Part of Fighting Force,” Reuters, June 5, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> “President al-Assad Gives Interview to the German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Newspaper,” Syrian Arab News Agency, June 18, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> “Insight: Syrian Government Guerrilla Fighters Being Sent to Iran for Training,” Reuters, April 4, 2013; “Insight: Battered by War, Syrian Army Creates its Own Replacement,” Reuters, April 21, 2013.

unity of purpose. Factional power struggles, economic interests, ethnic or tribal divides, and foreign-instigated proxy rivalries are all likely to trigger rebel-on-rebel fighting. Ideology also plays a part, but the media narrative of a looming war between al-Qa`ida and other rebels has likely overstated the role of doctrinal issues. Western and Gulf pressure on the SMC to confront al-Qa`ida is likely to be a more important cause of such conflict, if it eventually erupts.

Bashar al-Assad's government is also becoming increasingly dependent on paramilitary groups, including autonomous or foreign-led militias. Their support has improved al-Assad's staying power in many areas, but it also underlines the regime's gradual loss of sovereignty and cohesion. The Ba`ath government's strict messaging discipline and the centrality of Bashar al-Assad himself has delayed and obfuscated this slow unwinding of the state, but not stayed it. If the war drags on long enough, the al-Assad regime is likely to devolve into a decentralized patchwork of sectarian and client militias, only superficially resembling Syria's pre-2011 dictatorship.

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## From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi`a Militias

By Phillip Smyth

AS THE SECTARIAN nature of Syria's civil war grows, the theme of a larger pan-Shi`a struggle supportive of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad against radical Sunni elements is quickly becoming the norm. Reports have surfaced of Afghan Shi`a possibly fighting with pro-Assad militia organizations,<sup>1</sup> as well as a Shi`a fighter from the Ivory Coast.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is Iraqi Shi`a groups and individuals, mainly from Iranian-backed groups, that have sent the majority of militiamen to fight for al-Assad in Syria.

Beginning in early 2012, Iraqi Shi`a fighters started to trickle into Syria.<sup>3</sup> Participating Iraqi groups include Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hizb Allah, the Badr Organization, Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba (Harakat al-Nujaba), and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada.<sup>4</sup> There is also the possibility that militiamen affiliated with Moqtada al-Sadr, namely Liwa al-Yum al-Mawud, may be contributing fighters as well.<sup>5</sup>

The employment of these Shi`a fighters in Syria has been widespread in major areas of conflict, especially Damascus. Their training, tactics and weapons

further point to how Iran is using its ideologically loyal proxies to keep the Syrian regime in power.

This article examines the Iraqi organizations that supply fighters to Syria, in addition to their training, tactics and weapons. It finds that professional fighters and well-trained volunteer forces, with a strong adherence to Iranian revolutionary ideology, form the bulk of the Iraqi Shi`a militia contingent in Syria.

### The Combatants: Ideology and Professionalism

The press and social media assert that many of the Iraqi Shi`a fighters operating as part of Syria-based Shi`a militias, such as Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (the al-Abbas Brigade), are somewhat disorganized "volunteers" who lack training.<sup>6</sup> In terms of messaging importance, the emphasis on volunteers demonstrates a specific narrative that is meant to unite disparate Shi`a behind an Iranian-organized effort. This has especially been the case for Iraqis, whose main clerical leadership, both radical and traditional, have not been supportive of Shi`a militia activities in Syria.<sup>7</sup>

Volunteer fighters are clearly fighting in Syria.<sup>8</sup> Yet according to the fighters themselves, members of Shi`a militias are both vetted by Iranian and Syrian authorities and often endure rigorous training regimens.<sup>9</sup> One Iraqi Shi`a

1 Meena Haseeb, "Afghans Involvement in Syria War to be Investigated: Mosazai," Khaama Press [Kabul], April 8, 2013.

2 "Nakhstin shahid afriqaya madafa'herm hadhrat zaynab + 'aks," AhlulBayt News Agency, July 27, 2013.

3 Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides," *New York Times*, October 27, 2012.

4 Some of these groups, namely Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, may be fronts for Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hizb Allah.

5 Al-Sadr, however, has denied sending any forces to Syria and instead blamed "splinter groups." See Anissa Haddadi, "Syria: Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr Reported Sending Fighters to Prop Up Assad Regime," *International Business Times*, November 23, 2011; "Moqtada al-Sadr Says His Followers Not Fighting in Syria, but Members of 'Splinter' Groups Could be Involved," al-Arabiya, June 8, 2012; Ali Abel Sadah, "Sadr Gives Maliki 'Final Warning,'" *al-Monitor*, May 29, 2013; Frud Bezhan, "Reports of Muqtada al-Sadr's Political Demise May Be Greatly Exaggerated," Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, August 19, 2013.

6 Salah Nasrawi, "Iraqi Shia Dilemma in Syria," *al-Abram Weekly*, June 26, 2013; Tim Arango, Anne Barnard, Duraid Adnan, "As Syrians Fight, Sectarian Strife Infects Mideast," *New York Times*, June 1, 2013; Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites Flock to Assad's Side as Sectarian Split Widens," Reuters, June 19, 2013; "Footage from a Dead Iraq Shia Jihadists Phone-Cam: Iraqi Officer Volunteers Members of Abu-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade," August 13, 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fQxCSPI7cw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fQxCSPI7cw).

7 Hadeel al-Sayegh, "Iraq's Clergy Strive to Maintain Legacy Amid Rise of Shia Militias," *The National* [Abu Dhabi], August 6, 2013.

8 In Al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ite Militants Fight for Syria's Assad," some of the Iraqi Shi`a groups that have claimed to have sent fighters denied any presence in Syria.

9 "Iraqi Shiite Militants Start to Acknowledge Role in Syria," Reuters, April 11, 2013; Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, "Syrian War Widens Sunni-Shia Schism as Foreign Jihadis Join Fight for Shrines," *Guardian*, June 4, 2013.



militia commander told National Public Radio that Lebanese Hizb Allah manages some of the training.<sup>10</sup>

There has also been speculation over the ideological motivations of Iraqi Shi'a fighters in Syria. From Lebanese Hizb Allah to Iraq's Asaib Ahl al-Haq, organizations that have officially stated they have supplied Shi'a militiamen to Syria have all announced they follow Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary ideological concept of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist).<sup>11</sup> According to one Lebanese Hizb Allah fighter, the group's order to fight in the May-June 2013 battle of Qusayr was a direct religious order called a *taklif shar'i*.<sup>12</sup> According to Alia Ibrahim, the Beirut correspondent for Dubai TV, with the issuance of a *taklif shar'i*, "Supporters are obliged to follow his [Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's] commands, and disobeying him is considered tantamount to disobeying God."<sup>13</sup>

The Associated Press noted in June 2013 that highly organized Iranian proxy groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hizb Allah "are organizing much of the transfer of Iraqi fighters to Syria, according to Shiite politicians, clerics and militia members."<sup>14</sup> One Asaib Ahl al-Haq commander told the news agency, "I personally get dozens of calls each day from people [volunteers] in the provinces and Baghdad who want to go... We send well-trained ideological fighters."<sup>15</sup>

10 Kelly McEvers, "Shiite Fighters Drawn To Fight In Syria By Islamic Prophecy," National Public Radio, June 20, 2013. The claim that Lebanese Hizb Allah and Iran were training/equipping Shi'a forces in Syria was also repeated by "Abu Mujahid" as early as October 2012. The Iraqi Shi'a fighter in Damascus told Reuters, "Iran is working there by using Hezbollah, there are officers and militants from Hezbollah-Lebanon training the citizens and developing their fighting skills and abilities." See Al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ite Militants Fight for Syria's Assad."

11 *Wilayat al-faqih* means the rule by the specialist in religious law. For Iraqi groups that support this principle, see Reidar Visser, "Religious Allegiances among Pro-Iranian Special Groups in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 4:9 (2011).

12 Mona Alami, "Hezbollah Fighter Details Ops in Qusayr," *Now Lebanon*, June 4, 2013.

13 Alia Ibrahim, "Hezbollah's Mix of Prayer and Politics," *Washington Post*, April 1, 2007.

14 "Iraqi Shiite Fighters' Role in Syria Grows More Prominent, Raising Sectarian Tensions at Home," Associated Press, June 10, 2013.

15 Sam Dagher, "Fighters Enter Syria to Defend Shi'ites,"

## Iraq-Based Groups Supplying Fighters to Syria

Before March 2013, Iraq-based Shi'a militia groups denied that they were sending fighters to Syria.<sup>16</sup> When these groups posted death notices for fallen fighters, the location of death was not provided. Militants were generally described as having died performing their "jihadist duties."<sup>17</sup> Only in March 2013 did Iraqi Shi'a organizations begin to announce the deaths of members killed fighting in Syria. Public funerals and social media posts suggest that a number of new and more established organizations are fielding fighters for Syria. Based on the casualty reports released by Iraqi Shi'a fighters in Syria, the majority of these militiamen originated from Basra, Maysan Province, Najaf, and Baghdad.<sup>18</sup>

The key Iraqi Shi'a militia groups that have sent fighters to Syria to operate under the banner of Syria-based militias include: Kataib Hizb Allah, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization.

### Kataib Hizb Allah

The first "martyr" announcements came from Kataib Hizb Allah with the death of Ahmed Mahdi Shuweili in March 2013.<sup>19</sup> The Iraq-based Kataib Hizb Allah, an Iranian-backed Iraqi organization, neither hides its affinity for Iran nor disguises that Lebanese Hizb Allah is its role model.<sup>20</sup> Following the withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq, Kataib Hizb Allah rejected calls to put down its arms and has continued on a militant path in Iraq.<sup>21</sup> While deploying forces to Syria, Kataib Hizb Allah has been linked to attacks targeting Iranian dissidents in Iraq in June 2013.<sup>22</sup>

Associated Press, May 23, 2013.

16 Barbara Surk, "Fighting in Syria, Hezbollah Charts Risky Course," Associated Press, May 29, 2013.

17 Martin Chulov, "Hezbollah Commander Killed While on 'Jihad Duties' in Syria," *Guardian/Sydney Morning Herald*, October 4, 2012.

18 Phillip Smyth, "Roundup of Iraqis Killed in Syria," parts 1-3, available at [www.jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade](http://www.jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade).

19 "Al-muqawama al-islamiyya kata'ib Hizballah ta'lan al-istishahid ahd afrahd khilal al-difla 'an muqadisat w al-a'qida," al-Etejah TV [Iraq], April 16, 2013.

20 For details, see the group's official webpage at [www.kataibhizballah.org](http://www.kataibhizballah.org).

21 Aref Mohammed, "Iraq Militia Says to Keep Weapons, Citing Instability," Reuters, January 17, 2012.

22 Ashish Kumar Sen, "Rocket Attack Kills 2 Iranian

### Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada

Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada is another supplier of Iraqi Shi'a fighters to Syria. It was allegedly created in May 2013 with its founding goal to "protect Shi'a holy sites."<sup>23</sup> The group is reportedly led by Falah al-Khazali.<sup>24</sup> According to unnamed sources, however, Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani created the group after he left Kataib Hizb Allah and still currently leads it.<sup>25</sup> The group has not clarified the leadership confusion. In a May 8, 2013, statement issued by Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, it claimed it would defend Shi'a religious sites across the globe, had "fought the U.S. occupation in Iraq," and wanted to "liberate Jerusalem."<sup>26</sup> In May, it held three funerals for members killed in Syria,<sup>27</sup> and in late August it announced the deaths of eight more fighters.<sup>28</sup> The Associated Press also reported in May that its fighters had headed to Iran prior to flying to Syria.<sup>29</sup>

It is possible that Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada is a front for a Syrian civil war-focused military arm of the Basra, Iraq-based Sayyid al-Shuhada Movement.<sup>30</sup> The fact that most of Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada's publicly announced fallen fighters have

Dissidents, Wounds Dozens in Iraq," *Washington Times*, June 15, 2013; "Al Baghdadiya TV Watheg al Battat Iran MEK PMOI Attack Camp Liberty," al-Baghdadiya TV [Cairo], July 14, 2013.

23 "Tashyee' Iraqi Fi Al Basra Qutil Athna'a Al Difa'a a'an Maqam Al Sayyida Zeinab Qorb Dimashq," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 6, 2013.

24 "Tashiya ahd 'anasr kata'ib sayyid al-shuhada fi al-basra alathi saqat fi suriya," National Iraqi News Agency, May 6, 2013.

25 "Anshqaq amin 'ala kata'ib hizb allah al-iraq w tashikeel kata'ib 'sayyid al-shuhada,'" al-Masalah [Baghdad], April 14, 2013.

26 For a copy of the statement, see figure 2 in Phillip Smyth, "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada: Another Supplier of Iraqi Shia Fighters in Syria," June 3, 2013, [Jihadology.net](http://Jihadology.net), available at [www.jihadology.net/2013/06/03/hizballah-cavalcade-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada-another-supplier-of-iraqi-shia-fighters-in-syria](http://www.jihadology.net/2013/06/03/hizballah-cavalcade-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada-another-supplier-of-iraqi-shia-fighters-in-syria).

27 Adam Schreck and Nabil al-Jurani, "Iraqi Death Hints of Iran's Role In Syrian Crisis," Associated Press, May 6, 2013.

28 On August 25, 2013, the official Facebook page for the Badr Organization's military wing posted the announcement.

29 Nabil al-Jurani, "Iraqis Mourn 2 Shiite Fighters Killed in Syria," Associated Press, May 17, 2013.

30 "Sayyid al-Shuhada' Movement: 'We're for a federal region in the south,'" *Niqash* [Berlin], October 6, 2007.

originated from Basra also points to the possibility that there may be a link with the political organization.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba*

In June 2013, another new group emerged, calling itself Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba (also known as Harakat Nujaba). Like Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Nujaba announced its existence during a funeral in Maysan Province for seven of its fallen fighters.<sup>32</sup> The group also claimed to be a supplier of Shi'a fighters into Syria, particularly to the Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir militia.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Asaib Ahl al-Haq*

Formed in 2006 after it split from Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia, Asaib Ahl al-Haq has been the recipient of extensive training from Lebanese Hizb Allah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>34</sup> The group is also a proponent of Iran's *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine.<sup>35</sup> During the Iraq war that began in 2003, the group was a direct Iranian proxy that carried out hundreds of attacks on coalition forces and helped introduce the specialized explosively formed penetrator (EFP) warhead.<sup>36</sup> Despite Asaib Ahl al-Haq's claims that it was considering giving up its armed elements, the group retains and continues to utilize them.<sup>37</sup>

In spring 2013, Asaib Ahl al-Haq released numerous death announcements and held funerals for fighters killed in Syria. The relatively larger numbers (when juxtaposed to the losses of other Shi'a groups) established Asaib Ahl al-Haq as one of the major

suppliers of fighters to Syria. In July 2013, Asaib Ahl al-Haq announced that the fighters they were sending to Syria belonged to a special unit named Liwa Kafil Zaynab. Liwa Kafil Zaynab is not a new militia; instead, it is a separate unit within Asaib Ahl al-Haq, similar in scope to other military expeditionary units. The announcement of a subgrouping follows other geographically-oriented military units created by Asaib Ahl al-Haq during the Iraq war, such as the group's Kataib Imam Hassan al-Askari, which primarily operated in Diyala Province.<sup>38</sup> Liwa Kafil Zaynab's main goal is the "Defense of Sayyida Zaynab," an important Shi'a shrine located in southern Damascus whose "defense" has served as a main theme with Shi'a militias operating in Syria.<sup>39</sup> Immediately following the announcement of its existence, the group created its own YouTube station that promptly issued videos of its fighters. These videos also openly stated that fighters from Lebanese Hizb Allah and Liwa Kafil Zaynab actively cooperated and supported one another in Syria.<sup>40</sup>

#### *The Badr Organization*

The Badr Organization, which recently split from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and extensive links to the IRGC, also supports Iran's *wilayat al-faqih*.<sup>41</sup> Starting in May 2013, the group threatened to become more involved in the Syrian conflict.<sup>42</sup> The Badr Organization Military Wing's Quwet Shahid al-Sadr later announced its existence at around the same time as Liwa Kafil Zaynab. In one social media post, the group claimed to have flown

1,500 members into Syria.<sup>43</sup> As with Liwa Kafil Zaynab, Quwet Shahid al-Sadr appears to be a subgrouping of the main Badr Organization militia which is tasked with actions in Syria. On July 21, 2013, the Badr Organization confirmed the group had suffered its first combat death in Syria.

#### **Syria-Based Militias**

Since many Shi'a fighters arriving in Syria come from established political and militant organizations, their presence in Syria has been obscured by efforts to repackage them as part of a number of Syria-based militia groups. Syria-based militia groups, which do not operate in Iraq publicly, include the al-Abbas Brigade, Liwa Zulfiqar, Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn and Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir.

#### *Al-Abbas Brigade*

The al-Abbas Brigade has served as the primary front group for Iranian-backed combatants and organizations based in Iraq. Numbers for the group range between 500-1,500 fighters.<sup>44</sup> The al-Abbas Brigade was the first prominently mentioned Shi'a militia in Syria and announced its presence to the world via a music video and Facebook posts in the fall/winter of 2012.<sup>45</sup> A Reuters report suggested that the al-Abbas Brigade may have been initially started by former members of Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, all Iraqi Shi'a, living in the area of Sayyida Zaynab.<sup>46</sup> It combined a local al-Assad-controlled militia and new Iraqi Shi'a fighters from a number of Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a organizations.

31 Schreck and al-Jurani, "Ibna al-Basra yashi'yun jethmani shaheedin sharaka fi hamaya merqad sayyida zaynab 'aliha al-salaam," Young Journalists Club (Iran), May 19, 2013. The term "Sons of Basra" was regularly used on social media by Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada supporters and in Iranian media to describe their fighters.

32 "Al-Sadr al-Zawahiri yehdhursatbuqasaniya 'alwiya," al-Mada Press [Baghdad], June 16, 2013.

33 Ibid.

34 Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq," Institute for the Study of War, December 2012.

35 Visser.

36 Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 327.

37 Jack Healy and Michael S. Schmidt, "Political Role for Militants Worsens Fault Lines in Iraq," *New York Times*, January 5, 2012.

38 See al-Hak.org for a list of operations by Asaib Ahl al-Haq subgroups (including Kataib Imam Hassan al-Askar) and where they were carried out, available at [www.alhak.org/vb/showthread.php?t=2810](http://www.alhak.org/vb/showthread.php?t=2810).

39 These details were originally on the group's official Facebook pages, but they have been removed.

40 See the video marked, "AAH-LKZ fighters, including Karar join Lebanese Hizballah fighters near Damascus Airport," at Phillip Smyth, "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's Liwa'a Kafeel Zaynab," Jihadology.net, August 14, 2013, available at [www.jihadology.net/2013/08/14/hizballah-cavalcade-asaib-ahl-al-haqs-liwaa-kafeel-zaynab](http://www.jihadology.net/2013/08/14/hizballah-cavalcade-asaib-ahl-al-haqs-liwaa-kafeel-zaynab).

41 Joel Wing, "Iraq's Badr Organization Maintains its Longtime Ties With Iran," Musings on Iraq blog, July 10, 2013.

42 See figure 5 at Phillip Smyth, "Breaking Badr: Is Iraq's Badr Organization Operating in Syria?" Jihadology.net, June 25, 2013, available at [www.jihadology.net/2013/06/25/hizballah-cavalcade-breaking-badr-is-iraqs-badr-organization-operating-in-syria](http://www.jihadology.net/2013/06/25/hizballah-cavalcade-breaking-badr-is-iraqs-badr-organization-operating-in-syria).

43 The post was dated July 13, 2013.

44 Al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ite Militants Fight for Syria's Assad." For the higher number, see "Bafidiyu ashrita musajila w suwr tuwkid qatl hizballah fi aldakhil al-suri," Elaph [London], April 19, 2013.

45 Nicholas Blanford, "Video Appears to Show Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites Fighting in Syria," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 18, 2013. For more details on the music videos created to support al-Abbas Brigade and Shi'a fighters in Syria, see Phillip Smyth, "The Songs of Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas: Militant Iraqi Shia Music & Syria," Jihadology.net, July 3, 2013.

46 Al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites Flock to Assad's Side as Sectarian Split Widens."

The group is also suspected to have connections to Lebanese Hizb Allah and other Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a groups, such as Kataib Hizb Allah, due to its name and tactics.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Kataib Hizb Allah once had an armed group named the "al-Abbasi Brigade."<sup>48</sup>

The al-Abbasi Brigade's own imagery also suggests further links between the militia and Iranian revolutionary ideology. Its imagery includes photos of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and Hizb Allah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and symbols which draw their inspiration from IRGC and Hizb Allah logos.<sup>49</sup>

#### *Liwa Zulfiqar*

Liwa Zulfiqar, a group that shares many leaders and fighters with the al-Abbasi Brigade, also reportedly operates in Damascus. The group has been photographed "raising the banner of Abu Fadl al-Abbasi" in the northern section of Damascus called Barzeh.<sup>50</sup> Information on Liwa Zulfiqar's force deployments are unknown. Through photos and videos released by Liwa Zulfiqar, the group actively promotes its Iraqi Shi'a identity and combat operations.<sup>51</sup> In another photograph released by the group, a sniper is shown with the group's logos, wearing an Iraqi flag breast patch.

#### *Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn*

Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn is a Shi'a militia that operates in Damascus. The group's imagery often promotes their affiliation with Sadrist militias

and loyalty to Moqtada al-Sadr. Unlike fighters from other Iraqi Shi'a organizations, Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn's fighters have not been pictured with photographs of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Instead, they have pictures featuring Moqtada al-Sadr. At times, personnel in the group have been presented as also having former military experience in the Iraqi Army. The Iraqi military connection has been a highlighted feature in Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn's imagery. The group's reported leader, Majid Abu Dhiba, is at times shown wearing Iraqi military insignia and camouflage fatigues. The group's size is hard to ascertain; the largest number of their militiamen photographed at one time has been 16 members. It is likely the group is comprised of more fighters. Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn first publicly announced its establishment with the June 30, 2013, creation of a Facebook page. Throughout the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the group also announced it would be holding nightly *iftar* meals for the residents of the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir*

Another newer militia, Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir, claims to operate outside of Damascus in Aleppo. Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir announced its existence with a Facebook page on May 27, 2013.<sup>53</sup> On June 4, the first non-internet based evidence of its existence was presented at a mass funeral for seven members of the group.<sup>54</sup> While the organization claims to have strong links to Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba, its propaganda suggests a close relationship with Asaib Ahl al-Haq and also suggests a strong belief in Iranian ideological concepts.<sup>55</sup>

#### **Training, Tactics and Weapons**

According to the Saudi newspaper *al-Sharq*, training for Iraqi Shi'a militiamen headed to Syria was, at one point, organized by the IRGC and would occur over a two-week period in the western Iranian city of Sanandaj.<sup>56</sup> The newspaper added that Iraqi government sources claimed that these fighters were paid around \$50 a day for their activities.<sup>57</sup> Iraqi government sources also asserted that Iraqi Shi'a fighters would train for longer periods in camps run by Iran's elite IRGC Qods Force, primarily in the Iranian city of Varamin.<sup>58</sup>

Following their training, these fighters would be flown in small batches of 10-15 from Iran to Syria.<sup>59</sup> At Damascus Airport, these Iraqi Shi'a were bused to their areas of operation after a short meeting with Shi'a militia leaders.<sup>60</sup>

Iraqi Shi'a fighters, particularly those who had fought U.S. and coalition forces in an asymmetric manner, are not narrowed to a specific set of combat strategies. These groups have utilized a multitude of conventional tactics and techniques to project their power. Instead of being limited to the types of environments in which they engage Syrian rebel forces, these groups have also demonstrated abilities to fight in both urban and rural areas.

Iraqi Shi'a fighters often employ combined small unit tactics, with fighters wielding assault rifles (particularly Kalashnikov varieties), machine guns (namely versions of the 7.62x54mm PKM), rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and sniper rifles (including anti-materiel type sniper rifles). The Shi'a militias have reportedly assembled defensive sniper positions, conducted ambushes and counter-ambushes, and established

47 Blanford.

48 Ibid.

49 "Militant Shia Organizations & Iranian Revolutionary Symbolism" chart and image figures 7, 8, and 9 in Phillip Smyth, "What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbasi (LAFa)?: Assessing Syria's Shia 'International Brigade' Through Their Social Media Presence," *Jihadology.net*, May 15, 2013, available at [www.jihadology.net/2013/05/15/hizballah-cavalcade-what-is-the-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-lafa-assessing-syrias-shia-international-brigade-through-their-social-media-presence](http://www.jihadology.net/2013/05/15/hizballah-cavalcade-what-is-the-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-lafa-assessing-syrias-shia-international-brigade-through-their-social-media-presence).

50 See, for example, a Liwa Zulfiqar Facebook post dated August 12, 2013, available at [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=493805254039729&set=a.463904500363138.1073741828.463672427053012&type=1&theater](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=493805254039729&set=a.463904500363138.1073741828.463672427053012&type=1&theater).

51 See Liwa Zulfiqar's official Facebook page, available at [www.facebook.com/loa.zolfaqr](http://www.facebook.com/loa.zolfaqr). Also see AhlulBayt News Agency, August 20, 2013. In the photo set, "Abu Hajar" a former leader for the al-Abbasi Brigades and now a leader of Liwa Zulfiqar, is shown visiting Iran.

52 See Liwa Imam Husayn's official Facebook page, available at [www.facebook.com/LwaAlamamAlhsyn](http://www.facebook.com/LwaAlamamAlhsyn).

53 See Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir's official Facebook page, available at [www.facebook.com/L.sedazinab](http://www.facebook.com/L.sedazinab).

54 "Al-Sadr al-Zawahiri yehdhur satbuqa saniya 'alwiya'."

55 See figures 9-10 in Phillip Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria," *Jihadology.net*, July 20, 2013, available at [www.jihadology.net/2013/07/20/hizballah-cavalcade-liwaa-ammar-ibn-yasir-a-new-shia-militia-operating-in-aleppo-syria](http://www.jihadology.net/2013/07/20/hizballah-cavalcade-liwaa-ammar-ibn-yasir-a-new-shia-militia-operating-in-aleppo-syria).

56 "Ajnabi yaqatun fi suriya: al-tadreeb lisbu 'ayn fi madinat sanandaj al-iran al-wkamsun dawlan youmian al-mutadhuwa' al-iraqi," *al-Sharq*, June 13, 2013.

57 Ibid.

58 "Iraqi Shiite Fighters' Role in Syria Grows More Prominent, Raising Sectarian Tensions at Home."

59 Mahmood and Chulov; Al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites Flock to Assad's Side as Sectarian Split Widens." Photos of Iraqi Shi'a fighters being bused to combat zones are featured in figure 3 in Smyth, "Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada: Another Supplier of Iraqi Shia Fighters in Syria."

60 Ibid.



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checkpoints in urban and rural areas. Additionally, direct cooperation, in the form of providing infantry support for Syrian armored units, has also been promoted in certain released video clips by the fighters. Like their rebel foes, Shi'a militias manned by Iraqi fighters have also used "technical." These improvised trucks and jeeps often feature recoilless rifles, 23mm and 14.5mm cannons, 12.7mm and 7.62mm machine guns, or rockets.<sup>61</sup>

Highlighting the use of specific weapons has been another feature of the foreign-manned Shi'a groups. The emphasis on particular weapons is also part of the training schedule organized by Iran. According to one former fighter, "You have to enroll on a 45-day training course in Iran to be specialized in using a specific weapon like rocket launchers, Kalashnikov, sniper rifle or RPGs."<sup>62</sup>

Iraqi Shi'a operating as part of Syria's Shi'a militias have demonstrated higher levels of training, with more utilization of snipers. Many of these sniper tactics were perfected in Iraq with Iranian aid during the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq.<sup>63</sup> Iraqi Shi'a snipers—using optics-mounted 7.62x51mm FAL-type, the 7.62x51 bolt-action Steyr SSG 69 rifles, and especially versions of the Russian 7.62x54mm SVD (also known as the Dragunov)—are a regular feature of al-Abbas Brigade, Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir, and Liwa Zulfikar propaganda posted on the internet.<sup>64</sup> Occasionally, fighters wielding these weapons have functioned as designated marksmen on the squad level. In more publicized instances, teams of snipers and lone snipers are used in urban operations.<sup>65</sup>

61 See figure 35 in Smyth, "What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA)?: Assessing Syria's Shia 'International Brigade' Through Their Social Media Presence."

62 Mahmood and Chulov.

63 Richard N. Haass and Martin S. Indyk, *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. 197.

64 See figures 30-34 in Smyth, "What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA)?: Assessing Syria's Shia 'International Brigade' Through Their Social Media Presence." Also see photo marked figure 17 and videos marked "AAH-LKZ Sniper Firing" and "Another AAH-LKZ Sniper Video" in Smyth, "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's Liwa'a Kafeel Zaynab."

65 Ibid.

### Conclusion

The influx of Iraqi Shi'a fighters to Syria demonstrates that Iran is employing its ideologically-driven fighters from its network of regional proxies. As the conflict continues to be marketed as a pan-Shi'a conflict, Iraq also presents a fertile recruiting ground for new fighters. Iraqi Shi'a militias and fighters also benefit Iranian policy vis-à-vis the region's Shi'a Muslims by demonstrating that Iran is supportive of efforts to "defend Shi'ism." Tehran's support of Iraqi Shi'a fighters in Syria displays a broader acceptance of its ideology in a community that has increasingly felt embattled.

Judging from the creation of two new organizations, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba, it is highly probable that as the war continues and more Iraqi Shi'a fighters are funneled into Syria, further announcements for new groups will be made. Nevertheless, these groups are likely to function as proxies for other forces offering training and equipment for Iraqi Shi'a fighters heading to Syria.

Tehran's reliance on Lebanese Hizb Allah and its Iraqi Shi'a proxies in support of al-Assad demonstrates how these groups could be used in the future as a type of rapid reaction force to support Iranian interests elsewhere. Additionally, with the increase in trained, experienced, and ideologically motivated Iraqi fighters, their return home could further increase Iran's influence in Iraq. Due to their adherence to *wilayat al-faqih*, these organizations or their fighters may not engage in rogue militant activities, but instead further the interests of Iran.

If the al-Assad regime does collapse, Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias within Syria will be on the ground to assist in salvaging the remaining al-Assad establishment. It is probable that they will also be utilized as a core anti-rebel combat force to fight in Syria and to secure vital geostrategic transportation links to Lebanese Hizb Allah.

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